

Halo: Unyielding Conviction

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Summary: While fighting the forces of The Covenant Remnant, Captain Jonathan Wells, one of the earliest Spartan IVs must prevent the alien threat from obtaining ancient forunner weapons for its revenge against humanity. The will and fighting spirit of all who serve on The UNSC Righteous Conviction will be tested in the late years of the Human-Covenant war. (All reviews welcome.)

1. Prologue

**WARNING: Strong language and gore present within story. This is a war story after all. **

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Prologue: New Arrivals

1500 hours, January 20, 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Eridanus System, Eridanus III Theater of Operations

"Move, move!" a man in black armor yelled while green and blue bolts of plasma flew past him and impacted trees around him scorching and melting the foliage. Immediately following were pink needles that exploded shortly after impacting their targets. There were five of them total, one of them wounded from a Jackal. The bird-like alien wielded an elongated rifle that was made of purple allow topped off with a dull, long silver barrel with several pinkish thin crystals protruding from both sides of the weapon's mid-section, a Needle Rifle. The wounded soldier was being supported by another man in black armor. They were ODSTs, the Special Forces in the UNSC.

"Command, this is Charlie two-six. We're under heavy fire. We have

wounded and KIA and request immediate support!" the leading ODST yelled into his helmets comm systems. It was supposed to be a simple scouting run, the marines and ODSTS had just taken back one of their bases which had been Alpha base. Charlie squad, a squad consisting of ODSTS was scouting the jungle east of the base when they were ambushed by covenant forces and lost a man in the ambush while another was wounded. The wounded ODST had been hit by a round from the Needle Rifle which had exploded shortly after impacting the man's right side; if they didn't stop the bleeding soon he wouldn't make it.

"_Roget that two-six, we have a pelican en route to your location, ETA is two minutes. Hold on down there. Command out." _As soon as his helmet was silent again the ODST barely ducked behind a large moss covered boulder in time to dodge a bolt of green plasma. The bolt had struck a tree in front of him and melted the center of it which in turn started its collapse.

"Shit!" was all the man could say before diving out of the path of the falling tree. He tried to get some of the mud off of his visor so he could see. It took longer than he would have liked but as he started to get his feet he heard the sound of footsteps close by. The next few seconds went by slowly as a skirmisher rounded the corner, its small, semi-circular purple; weapon with bright green tips was drawn and aimed straight for the unfortunate man. The weapon's green ends flared to life as it prepared to ODST instinctively reached to his side holster for his M6G Magnum. Much to his horror however, he realized he had dropped it when he dove to avoid the falling tree.

He was snapped out of his fear induced stupor when he heard the sound of gunshots. It was two of his fellow ODSTS who were gunning down the bird-like skirmisher right in front of him with their MA5C Assault Rifles.

"Get a move on LT! We need to go!" one of the two men shouted shortly after the gunshots stopped and the skirmisher lay in a pool of its own purple colored blood. The five troopers continued their run through the jungle towards Alpha base when they suddenly heard the roar of a pelican drop ships engines.

As soon as the pelican was in sight a voice broke over the leading ODSTS helmet's speakers. "_Hey Jack looks I'm pulling you out of the fire again huh?"

Jack the leading ODST laughed before replying. "Yeah sorry about that captain but I'm glad to see you're still kicking. I haven't heard from you in so long I thought you might have bit the dust."

"_In the covenant's dreams maybe, I'm not dying anytime soon. All right Spartans let's go help the Lieutenant and his men and teach the covies a lesson they won't soon forget!" _Within moments the drop ship touched down in a clearing a few meters ahead of the fleeing ODSTS. As soon as it landed the back hatch opened up and six men clad in Mjolnir powered assault armor filed out. One of them wore red armor with a Mjolnir R variant helmet equipped on top of his black skin suit while the rest wore dull black armor with equally black S variant helmets. The helmets and armor both matched the color of the skin suit underneath the armor that was made of layers of matte black metal. The armor covered the chest, shoulders, forearms, knees,

shins, outer thighs and the groin and weighed over one-thousand pounds while it was in use. The armored soldiers stood over seven feet tall each. They were known as Spartans, genetically augmented super soldiers. The only ones who could use the Mjolnir powered assault armor because of the armor's weight and inhuman reflex time. The red armored Spartan stepped forward while the other five followed close behind. "Don't worry the cavalry is here. Saber squad, move it!"

Jack and his fellow ODSTs were still moving towards the clearing with covenant forces not far behind. Jack then called out to the trooper to his right. "Hey Jackson, toss me your sidearm and help support Williams so we can make this trip a little faster."

"Right!" He called back just before throwing his Magnum to Jack then went to help support their wounded comrade. The covenant forces were closing in on the five men as they retreated. As soon as it was within range a skirmisher opened fire with its plasma pistol, many of the shots missed but one managed to hit Jackson in the shoulder. The man screamed in pain as the plasma burnt through his armor and scorched his shoulder, he then collapsed and fell to the ground clutching his shoulder. The sudden lack of support on the left side of Williams caused the other ODST who was supporting him lose his grip and drop him.

"Wilson! Ramirez! Grab Jackson and Williams and pull back, I'll cover!" Jack yelled.

"Sir!" the two men shouted in unison before grabbing Williams and Jackson by their under arms and began pulling them back behind a large boulder at the foot of a small hill.

As soon as they began moving Jack caught sight of the skirmisher that had shot Jackson. The creature was fast, it was clearly faster than any human. It was almost too fast for Jack to keep in his sights. Not long after it started its sprint the skirmisher opened fire. Jack ducked and rolled behind a nearby tree narrowly dodging the incoming plasma fire. He rounded the tree and sighted the skirmisher; as soon as he saw it he fired three shots from his magnum. The first shot hit the skirmisher in the leg causing it to trip; the second had impacted its shoulder while the third had hit the creatures head killing it instantly. "One down" Jack said to himself as he made his way back to his men. "How are they doing?" he asked.

Wilson turned his helmet covered head and answered from behind his opaque visor. "Not good. Jackson's wound looks pretty bad but he should be fine if we can get him some treatment and I mean fast. Williams doesn't look so hot, he's got it real bad. He's lost a lot of blood and it looks like he might pass out soon. We ran out of bio foam a while ago so he's in real trouble LT."

Jack looked down at his men and was trying to figure out a way to get them to safety as he thought over everything that had happened. "I see. Well there's not much we can do but hold here and hope the captain reaches us in time."

Ramirez turned to Jack and asked "Is this it lieutenant?"

Jack then placed his left hand on Ramirez's shoulder. "Don't give up. I'm sure our captain will come through for us."

That gave Ramirez some hope. He shook his head slowly accepting the lieutenant's words "Yeah I hope you're right LT. I want to see earth again."

It was Jack's turn to nod "Me too."

Wilson took off Williams' helmet to reveal a young man with short cropped dark brown hair and green eyes. A small trickle of blood was flowing from the corner of his mouth down past his chin. He looked very pale from his loss of blood and was on the verge of passing out. Wilson then grabbed his canteen and splashed some water on Williams' face. "Hey there buddy, don't you go leaving us just yet. The captain's on his way and we'll get you fixed up and back home in no time."

Williams smiled despite the pain and managed to speak in a tired and pain filled voice in between short, light gasps. "Gladâ€œto hearâ€œit."

Jack turned back around to face the other four ODSTs and began to speak. "All right, Wilson hand me your rifle and grab Williams. Ramirez you help Jackson to his feet and stay near him in case he needs support. We're moving out, now."

Wilson looked at him in disbelief "did you see Williams's wounds? There's no way we can move him. We need to find some way to stop the bleeding before we move him."

Jack understood the concern but his mind was made up "I know but I'd rather risk that than take my chances and get all of you killed while waiting here to be saved. Those two skirmishers we killed were just scouts. It won't be long before the covenant catches up to us and we're finished."

Jack then felt a tug on his arm; he looked down to see it was Williams pulling on his arm. "Give me a gun LT. I'll hold off the covenant as long as I can while you guys get away. I doubt I'll live from this wound anyways, I know how bad it is." He spoke through clenched teeth, it was clear he was in a great amount of pain.

Jack then placed his hand on Williams's shoulder just before speaking. "No way in hell. I'm not going to leave you behind Williams. Remember our captain's favorite motto? No one gets left behind. We're either going to get out of this together or we're going to die together. We-" Jacks words were cut off by the sound of footsteps. The five men turned to their right and faced the direction of the footsteps and their possible demise.

The foot falls were much heavier than the skirmishers and coming around the boulder the ODSTs were behind. The footsteps got louder and closer by the second. An Elite rounded the corner; the Elites were the frontline leaders of the covenant's forces. It was clad in metallic blue-ish armor that covered almost all of its body including its digitigrade legs. It towered above the men as it stood over seven feet tall. The creature opened its four mandibles and let out a low growl as it raised its plasma rifle. The weapon was made of two round elongated ovals, one larger than the other being connected by a steel-colored grip, with the front tips flaring an electric blue. It was preparing to gun the men down.

"_Damn," _was all Jack could think. He was the first to react by grabbing his magnum and aiming it at the elite as he got up and stood between the alien and his men. Jack was prepared to die protecting his men; he knew however that his magnum would more than likely very little against the elite's shields.

Out of nowhere a man the same size as the elite who was clad in red armor tackled the elite against the boulder. The man pulled his right arm back and slammed it into the elite's chest, knocking the wind out of the alien. The elite's shields shimmered around it, they glowed silver before dissipating with a popping sound. As it let out a growl of pain the elite tried to raise its hand that held the plasma rifle but noticed that it was pinned to the boulder by the man. The red armored titan reached up and unsheathed a knife on the left side of his chest. He quickly flipped the knife around to face downward just before he stabbed it into the elites elongated neck. The elite let out a cry of pain as its purple blood spewed from the wound an onto the Spartan's armor. It only took a few seconds for the elite to lose its strength and slump down to the ground, the life drained from its body.

"Captain!" Wilson called out.

The towering man then turned to face the ODSTs. "Sorry I'm late, ran into some slight resistance on the way here. The covies had an ambush waiting for you up ahead but we took care of it."

Wilson was slightly confused "we? Where are the other Spartans?"

As the red Spartan pulled his knife free of the elite's corpse he pointed is knife over his shoulder indicating that the Spartans were right behind him. Just as he did that five more Spartans clad in dull black almost grey armor came over the hillside. They were just as tall as the first Spartan that showed up.

One of the armored giants then spoke "sorry we're late Captain Wells. We were finishing up the last of the covenant forces between here and the LZ."

The red Spartan was Captain Jonathan Wells, the commander of over seventy Spartans onboard his own ship. He then turned back to his fellow Spartans before speaking. "Jones, Taylor come over here and patch up Williams and Jackson. I want you two to take them back to the pelican and head back to base. Jack, you and your squad are pulling out, I'm taking over."

Jack let out a small laugh "nice to see you too Captain. I'll head back to base but do me a favor and give 'em hell." Wells nodded and replied "I plan on it, now go get some rest Jack, the pelican is just past that hillside in a clearing." Jack made a half-salute gesture before smacking the back of his hand lightly against Well's armored shoulder and heading to where the pelican had landed along with Wilson and Ramirez.

As this happened, Jones and Taylor reached into the medical bags that each of them carried and pulled out two canisters of bio foam. They pulled up on the nozzles that ran the length of the canisters and put them just barely above the wounds on Jackson and Williams. Both of them then pressed a button on the top of the canisters and light

greenish white foam suddenly spewed out of them covering the wounds. As the foam covered Jackson's wounded shoulder and the large wound in Williams's abdomen the foam began to harden.

While the foam sealed and covered the wounds Captain Wells reached up and pressed a button on his helmet opening a comm channel. "Saline I have seven heading back to the pelican, two wounded. They need an immediate evac to base. Once you're there I want you wait on standby until I say otherwise."

A calm female voice replied in a generic English accent _"should I respond to any emergency pickups that need to be made? Also Commander Wells found something interesting on her scouting run that you might want to take a look at when you get back."_

The Captain then stood and reached for his assault rifle which was attached to the magnetic strips on the back of his armored suit. "All right I'll take a look when I get back to base but I might be a while longer, it seems as though there might be a covenant base north of my location. Respond to and aid any squads in need of help."

Saline replied _"Would you like fire support sir?"_

As Jones and Taylor supported Williams and Jackson while they headed back for the pelican Captain Wells replied. "Negative, I can handle things down here; just get those men back to base."

Saline was Captain Wells' personal "smart" A.I. she was in charge of running the ship while he was on the ground. The ship was called the UNSC Righteous Conviction, a Phoenix-class Colony ship that was refitted for war. The ship was equipped with a large Onager Magnetic Accelerator Cannon or MAC for short. Since Saline was networked into the ship she could also remote control the pelican drop ships so that they would not have to risk losing a pilot. She often did this in high-risk operations or when they were simply short-handed on pilots.

Wells then thought over what he should do next. "All right, fan out and find your positions. We're setting up shop here. Those covies wouldn't have been far behind Jack's squad." The rest of the Spartans replied by nodding their heads and began to move with fluid motion.

Joseph Kane, the team's explosives specialist managed to find a position between two thick trees and laid flat on his stomach. On his back his back he carried two 'Damage Packs.' Each pack held multiple types of explosives, one of which carried C-12. C-12 shaped charges are highly explosive and volatile. One small cube a C-12 can level a five story building in seconds. As he lay down on his stomach he raised his M90 Shotgun towards the direction the covenant would be coming from.

Allen Smith, Saber Team's sniper positioned himself on top of a large flat boulder for a wide sight line. He rested his rifle with the bipod mounted just under the front of the scope to steady his aim. Afterwards the marksman adjusted his SRS-99 AM Sniper Rifle's scope by twisting the dial on top of it slowly. The scope his rifle was equipped with was a special model which outlined any heat sources within the scope's sight. The scope also featured a night vision mode for use during night time operations. He carried a bag full of extra

clips and special types of ammunition ranging from tranquilizers to heavy armor piercing rounds.

Jacob Wyatt the team's computer specialist took position behind several medium sized boulders. He leveled his MA5C down range and awaited his targets approach. The bag he carried contained several tools for breaking into and hacking electronics. He was trained in and given what amount of information the UNSC had on Covenant technology as well as decryption software programmed into hand held computers. In short he was the next best thing to an A.I. when it came to hacking and decrypting.

Captain Jonathan Wells, Saber Team's commander positioned himself at the forefront of the formation behind a tall slab of rock not far from Wyatt's position. He waited eagerly for his targets to show themselves as he crouched and leveled his MA5C around the slab. The bag he carried held the team's smoke grenades. The green smoke grenade was for an area that was safe to land in. The red one however was for an emergency evacuation for if things went south. He also carried a signal flare as a backup. Each of the Spartans wielded M6G Magnums for side arms on their right thighs.

Wells pressed a button on his helmet to open a com link "Smith, got anything?"

He heard a click through his helmet as Smith replied. "I count six, no seven hostiles. Three grunts, two skirmishers and two elites. They seem a bit relaxed, must think their scouts took care of the ODSTs."

The Captain thought things over, "Smith, take the shot on one of those elites when you get it. We don't need them causing trouble." A green acknowledgement light winked on in Wells' HUD.

If Smith was using the acknowledgement light then that meant he was going silent and preparing to take a shot.

Wells spoke up once more "everyone ready?" a moment later two more green lights winked on indicating his team was in position. "Fire at will, no going solo. Stay together and watch your sides." As soon as he said those words a loud crack echoed through the forest.

The elite that lead front of the covenant scouts heard the crack just before the sniper round hit home. The elite's energy shields flickered silver before dissipating under the sheer force of the bullet. The bullet however continued on its path past the shields and struck the elite in its neck. The elite wrapped its four fingered leathery hands around its neck as its thick purple blood poured out of the wound. Within seconds it fell to the ground choking on its own blood and died.

As the elite fell, the rest of the covenant scouting party began to panic and run for any available cover. Too late, as soon as the second elite began to move Smith took another shot and hit it directly in its head, causing the elite to fall helplessly to the ground with its blood slowly forming a pool.

While Smith took out the elites and caused the covenant team to panic the rest of Fire team Saber advanced.

Wells moved straight up through the center. As soon as he was close enough he fired once burst from his assault rifle.

The small flurry of bullets was directed towards one of the grunts. The rounds pelted the small aliens orange body armor and hit its throat severing its breather mask. The shots missed the cone shaped tank containing methane the creature carried on its back. It fell to the ground clutching its throat and making a quiet gurgling noise. Its luminous blue blood covered the tree next to it.

Wells caught sight of another grunt but as he did Kane was upon the small creature and drove his knife through its tiny neck.

The last grunt tried to run away right as Wyatt opened fire catching the small alien's tank causing it to ignite and explode in a light green haze, sending its body flying.

All that was left was the two skirmishers. One of the skirmishers attempted to flank Kane but was cut short by a rifle round from Smith. The creature fell to the ground in an instant, lifeless.

The last of the two skirmishers tried to go after the Captain. As soon as Wells caught sight of it the skirmisher opened fire with its plasma pistol. Wells dove to the right to avoid the shots. He noticed a rather large tree in between him and the skirmisher. He also noticed that the tree was old and had a loose foundation, he smiled beneath his helmet. As soon as he made the realization he broke off into a sprint and threw his leg forward into a mighty kick. The blow had impacted the tree and splintered the trunk where Wells' foot had struck. The tree gave way under the pressure and began collapsing. The skirmisher noticed this and immediately jumped to its left dodging the tree.

As the skirmisher righted itself it looked forward to see captain Wells running towards it. Before the skirmisher could react Wells was already upon it. The Captain brought his knee up impacting the creature's head causing it fly backward from the staggering blow and hit the fallen tree. The skirmisher would not live from a blow like that. Multiple bones in its neck and throughout its bird like, feather adorned head were shattered. Wells then pulled the knife free of the holster on his shoulder once more. He pulled his arm back and slammed the blade into the skirmishers neck with enough force to pin it to the tree. The alien died almost instantly while its thick purple blood ran down the tree it was stuck to. The covenant scouting team had been slaughtered with no chance of victory against the Spartans.

As Captain Wells wrenched his knife free of the tree and the skirmisher he began to speak. "Why did the covenant just send a hand full of troops?"

It was Kane who responded "don't know maybe they thought this would be enough to finish off the ODSTs."

Wells wringed his blade of as much blood as possible before sheathing it again and spoke. "Or maybe, they're keeping all of their forces back to protect something and can't spare much."

As the rest of the team gathered around Wells, Smith spoke up "either way it's your call Captain. We were just supposed to help out those

ODSTs but we can go for a scouting run and check out whatever the covenant is up to."

Suddenly a voice broke inside of Jonathan's helmet, it was Saline. "Captain, I repositioned a satellite and it seems that covenant forces are gathering not far from your location. It looks like they found something, some sort of structure."

Wells pressed a button on his helmet to reply "appreciate the heads up Saline, we'll head back for now and take a look."

The calm voice that was Saline's soon spoke again "aye sir, rerouting a pelican to your location now."

It had been over an hour later before the pelican reached them. It was covered in dents and black spots. As the Spartans walked up the ramp in the back of the pelican they noticed the rest of Saber Team was there.

Richard Jones was the first to speak up "apologies for the late ride Captain, pelican took a pounding on the way back. We had to make repairs."

As Wells sat down on one of the many wall mounted seats in the back of the pelican drop ship he replied "don't worry about it but saddle up when we get back to base. We're going for a hot drop and breaking up a covenant excavation party soon after we arrive." Jones and Taylor nodded as the pelican's engines roared to life and started its journey to Alpha base.

2. Section I

Section I: Leave No Stone Unturned

1830 hours, January 20, 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Eridanus III, Alpha Base, grid twelve by twenty-three

The sound of the pelican's engines filled the hanger as it landed. As soon as it landed the hatch in the back of the drop ship opened for Saber Team to step out of. Captain Wells was the first one to step out of the pelican. When he finally stepped off of the ramp he placed his assault rifle on his back. Afterwards he removed his helmet to reveal a young man in his twenties. He had hair that was shoulder length and black. His bangs looked jagged and stopped just above his eye brows and he had deep ocean blue eyes that were filled with confidence. His skin was also pale from spending so much time in his sealed armor. After removing his helmet he took a moment to look around the hanger. The hanger was a mess to say the least, it had scaffoldings everywhere which had spare parts and tools piled on top of them. There were oil and blood stains across over half of the floor from repairing pelicans and carrying wounded out of them. The hanger was also filled with people, civilians that were evacuated. A lot of them were wounded but the medical wing of the base was already full. The medical wing took in the most critically wounded for surgery while field medics tended to people whose wounds weren't as serious.

"What a mess" Wells said to himself.

He then heard a soft feminine voice "it's only going to get worse." He then turned to his right to notice a woman clad in dull, worn, dark pink almost red Spartan armor approaching him. She wore the same type of armor as him, a Mjolnir mark VI body with an R variant helmet and she was only two inches shorter than him.

As she approached the Spartan removed her helmet revealing a young woman similar in age as Wells. She had waist length vibrant pink hair which was kept in a bun. The front of her hair was let down and framed her face as it fell just below her chin. Her bangs were like Wells' and stopped just above her eye brows. Her eyes were a vibrant purple that held a great deal of emotion but at the same time looked tired. Her skin was a fair pale. Her name is Alice Wells, the wife of captain Wells. Alice looked down at Wells' armor and smirked when she noticed the purple blood covering it. "Have fun?" she asked.

Wells let out a small laugh before replying "more or less. Saline mentioned you found something."

Alice rolled her eyes while smiling "same old John, work first talk later." He rubbed the back of his head while holding his helmet under his arm and chuckled.

"I promise I'll make time to talk later but right now we need to find out what the covenant's after."

Alice smiled seemingly satisfied with what his reply "I was joking, follow me and I'll show you what I found." She then turned around and walked through a door as it slid open; 'John' followed her through it. Five minutes later they made their way through the maze of doorways and were at the heart of the base. As they entered a room full of computer monitors with people in lab coats typing away at keyboards they approached a table with a glowing, electric blue top in the center of the room. A moment later the top of a cylinder next to the table lit up and a hologram appeared. The holographic image was a fifth as tall the Spartans and looked like a woman with waist length dark hair who was also dressed in a kimono. Her bangs were the same as John and Alice's. It was also a ghostly blue. This was Saline, John's personal 'smart' A.I.

As soon as she appeared Alice spoke "Saline, show John what I found on my run."

Saline then turned to Alice "not even saying please commander?"

Alice rolled her eyes and spoke with an amused smile "please?" As she said this the table glowed brighter before a holographic image of a mountainous landscape rose from the table.

"Captain, remember the structure I mentioned before? Commander Wells actually discovered that area and I repositioned a satellite to get a better view. This is what I found." The map zoomed in to show a large metal gateway like door in the side of a mountain. The doorway was open and covenant troops were entering and leaving through it.

"Interesting" was all John said.

Saline lightly shook her head "indeed, I recommend we get a few teams

down there to investigate immediately."

John pondered this for a brief moment before replying "agreed, tell the rest of Saber team to arm up and meet me back in the hanger. Alice you wanna come with?"

Alice visibly brightened up and smiled as she spoke "I knew you missed me. I'll go grab my gear."

Before she began to leave John smiled and spoke "always."

Ten minutes later all members of Saber team including Alice was back in the hanger. The weapons Alice carried were an MA5C Assault Rifle and an SRS-99 AM Sniper Rifle with a switchable thermal scope lens. She turned to John and quickly kissed him on the cheek before sliding her helmet on and speaking "all set captain, also you need to shave when we get back." She lightly laughed at her last statement. John then reached up to rub the place Alice had kissed to find out that he was growing a light beard.

"That an order?" He asked.

Alice turned back to face him and smiled behind her helmet "a standing one."

John just smiled and pulled on his helmet before replying "yes ma'am." After he boarded the pelican the rest of Saber followed. The pelican's engines roared to life as it rose to the sky and began its journey toward the north and the unknown structure.

The pelican finally landed in a flat area in between two small hills. The back hatch opened up and the Spartans all filed out. As soon as the hatch opened they noticed that they had landed in the middle of a blizzard. John couldn't even see ten feet ahead of himself. "Damn, everyone switch to thermal." In less than a moment John's visor and heads up display changed colors. The surroundings were a deep blue outlined by white lines. Any heat source including the Spartans were a very warm orange and yellow while being outlined with black lines.

John called back to his team over their TEAMCOM channel through their helmets "get a move on Saber; let's not keep the covenant waiting." He was answered by six green winking lights in his helmet's HUD. Saber team continued its march for twenty more minutes before encountering a ridge line where the blizzard lightened up into a light flurry of snow. With their thermal visors John and the rest of Saber team immediately noticed the covenant forces as they were many blurs of orange and red moving in and out of the large structure.

John switched his visor back to normal, as did the other six Spartans. He increased his visor's magnification to two-hundred percent and examined the structure. Alice walked up next to him and stopped just before speaking "what do we got?"

John continued examining the structure as he spoke "definitely not a natural formation or cave, it looks forunner."

This peaked Alice's interest "forunner? What is it doing way out here in the mountains?"

John's visor returned to normal as he stood up "don't know, maybe the planet wasn't always like this or maybe they were trying to hide somethingâ€|"

Alice continued to look on at the structure "â€|and whatever secrets the forrunners would want to hide, the covenant would love to find." John the grabbed his assault rifle from the magnets on his back and began moving across the ridge line with his team right behind him.

"In any event, we need to clear the covenant out of that structure. Alice, I want you and Smith to position up at the ridgeline and wait to fire on my order." Two green acknowledgement lights winked on in John's HUD as he continued running. Alice and Smith darted off immediately and stopped when they found a good firing position. The part of the ridgeline that they stopped at provided a perfect over watch position. The two Spartans had a shot on every covenant soldier that was outside of the forunner structure. They both laid flat on their stomachs with one meter separating them. As they propped their rifles up with the attached bipods, they also adjusted their scopes with the dial on top of the rifles.

Alice pressed a button on her helmet to radio in "we're position, just say when."

John and the rest of team had found a trench like trail that lead down through the ridgeline and positioned them just outside of the structure as well as the covenant forces. John and the other five Spartans found several large rocks to hide behind and watch the covenant from. As the captain gave the signal for them to stop a lone elite guard heard their footsteps. As the large creature turned the corner it was met with a razor sharp combat knife to its throat, courtesy of John. John shouted "when!" Just as he did he heard two loud cracks from the sniper rifles. After the shots were fired the Spartans heard the roar of one of the elites as it was struck dead center in the chest by a rifle round, killing it.

Kane turned the corner to spot a mounted plasma turret that was manned by a grunt. He then grabbed a grenade from one of his damage packs. As soon as the grenade left the large pouch Kane pressed the button to arm it and tossed it towards the emplacement. The grenade landed and detonated killing the gunner and two more grunts that were nearby as well as toppling the gun in a haze of shrapnel.

John followed up by turning the corner and crouching on one knee. He opened fire in short controlled bursts taking down two jackals and a grunt.

"Move up!" John ordered.

As soon as he did, Jones, Taylor, and Wyatt began their sprint for cover that was closer to the enemy. While his men charged ahead John provide covering fire causing and elite to duck behind a covenant barricade wall. As soon as the elite stuck his head up to return fire a sniper rifle round impacted its neck while ripping through its shields.

The elite clutched its neck as it fell to the ground and bled from its wound. John began his sprint for closer cover and as he did a

jackal with a needle rifle was on small hillside and prepared to open fire. Before the jackal could fire however, it was met with a rifle round to the chest knocking it off of its elevated position. Wyatt, Jones and Taylor opened fired simultaneously dropping an elite and two more jackals. The thundering sound of assault rifle fire was accompanied by the loud cracks from the snipers for a few more moments before it stopped.

Every covenant guard outside the structure was dead. John counted at least three squads worth of troops. Bodies littered the ground as their own purple and luminous blue blood covered it and stained the snow. The ground reminded John of a painted canvas with all the different colors of blood covering the white snow. "Let's move Saber. Alice, Smith get down here, we're going in."

As he said this Alice shouldered her rifle and equipped her assault rifle as she and Smith ran down to John who was waiting just outside the door of the structure.

"Alright the covies inside must have heard all the noise so get ready. Stick together, tight formation. No lone wolves and keep your heads down. I want everyone to come out alive from this one." As he turned to face the large opened doorway he was answered by six green winking lights in his helmet.

As soon as they began to move he began to think _"I wonder why Alice isn't talking at all; she usually would have made a few jokes or smart remarks by now. I'll just have to ask her about it later." _Alice was usually a chatter box but her lack of comments slightly unnerved John. That usually meant something was wrong. Seeing how she hasn't said anything concerning the mission he assumed it was a personal problem. As concerned as he was he had to finish the mission first and worry about personal feelings later even though he did not like it.

Saber team began its dissent from the ramp at the entrance that lead deeper into the structure. The walls, floor and ceiling of the structure all looked metallic with several lights shining from them. There were also lighted lines that adorned the structure which was how forunner technology looked.

Smith spoke over TEAMCOM "say captain, what do you think the covenant is after down here?" John replied "don't know but whatever it is it can't be good for us humans."

Alice the spoke up "agreed but I think the covenant is going to put up a fight trying to keep us out."

John looked over his shoulder back at his team and spoke "then let's pick up the pace Saber. It wouldn't be polite if we kept the covies waiting." The Spartans ran through the forunner catacombs at break neck speed. Ten minutes later they were close to the heart of the structure with no sign of covenant forces. Their progress slowed to a crawl as they came upon a hard light bridge in a huge chamber like room. The bridge glowed electric blue as it stretched across what seemed to be a bottomless ravine.

As they walked across it Alice decided to speak "don't look down."

John smirked behind his helmet _"same old Alice" _he thought. As the group of Spartans crossed the bridge they noticed a light shining through a smaller door and the other end of the room. They made their way across the room quickly and stopped at the door. John turned the corner slowly and spotted at least four covenant squads circled around some sort of small sphere that was the same color as the hard light bridge.

He moved slowly through the door and spotted an elite to his right along with several horizontal rectangular metal slabs protruding from the ground that looked just like the rest of the structure. They were long and just tall enough to fit over half of his team behind them. Those slabs meant cover and cover was precisely what John wanted right now in case things got hot.

He crouched and quietly approached the elite guard from behind. As he got closer he attached his assault rifle to the magnets on his back and reached for the knife on his left shoulder. He unsheathed his knife just as he got to the elite and wrapped his left arm around the elite's elongated neck. Just as the elite dropped his plasma rifle to attempt to free himself from John's grip his assailant stabbed the combat knife into the creature's neck. John pulled the knife back leaving a large gash in the alien's neck and preventing it from calling for its comrades.

The elite's body fell slowly and quietly as John pulled it behind one of the metal slabs, a silent kill. The rest of Saber team had positioned themselves around the covenant forces, each one behind a slab. Alice, Kane, and Jones to his right while Smith, Wyatt, and Taylor were to his left, a perfect ambush.

The captain then surveyed the remainder of the covenant's forces; all of them were focused on the orb in the center. He also took note that their weapons were lowered. This meant that they were relaxed and must not have heard the gunfire because of how deep inside the structure they were.

"_Perfect targets" _John thought with a grin as he lit up a green light in each of the Spartan's helmets signaling for them to open fire. The covenant forces wouldn't stand a chance against the ambush considering they had little to no cover.

He sheathed his knife and leveled his assault rifle on the nearest elite. As he opened fire the rest of his team did as well at their respective targets. The elite's shields flickered to life and gave way under John's sustained fire. It didn't even have time to turn before its shields were depleted and bullets were piercing its armor hitting it in vital areas. The elite dropped to the floor as the grunts panicked and started to run in different directions trying, unsuccessfully to dodge the incoming hailstorm of bullets. Three grunts hit the ground dead as Taylor, Jones, and Wyatt fired their assault rifles. Alice and Smith caught the last two elites in their sights. Alice opened fire at her target with her assault rifle as Smith fired one clean shot from his sniper rifle which hit one of the two elites dead center in the head, killing it instantly.

The six jackals had managed to turn around and activate their energy shield gauntlets. The blue, solid plasma shields the aliens wore on their left wrists were large, circular and had small half circle openings the right side. The openings allowed the jackals to aim the

plasma pistols they carried in their right hands while maintaining protection. The shields slightly distorted the jackal's bird-like forms.

As the jackals crouched behind their shields they opened fire. Saber team quickly got back behind their cover as the bolts of green plasma flew past them and impacted the slabs melting small dents into the walls.

"Frag em!" John yelled and just as he did Kane attached his shotgun on his back and pulled two grenades out of his "damage packs." Kane turned around the cover and gave the explosives a mighty toss after priming them. The grenades land right behind the jackals and detonated before the jackals could turn their shields. The explosions sent the jackals flying while the shrapnel penetrated the armor of the ones who weren't killed in the initial blast.

The shrapnel itself was enough to kill the frail aliens. After the explosions settled down and John heard no more plasma pistols firing he turned to see his fallen foes. The grenades not only killed the jackals but the remaining three grunts as well. The aliens' bodies were strewn across the floor while their different colored blood covered the ground they lay on.

The ground where the grenades had detonated was completely black. John slowly made his way past the bodies while occasionally looking down to make sure the aliens were dead. The rest of Saber team followed as John approached the artifact the covenant gathered around. The artifact looked unharmed from the fire fight that had just happened much to John's relief.

"That wasn't so hard after all," said Alice.

Upon closer inspection the sphere was comprised of small glowing hexagonal plates and looked several times bigger than John's hand. The plates that made up the electric blue sphere were inscribed with what looked like ancient symbols, the language of the forrunners. John slowly reached his arm out towards the sphere but was caught by Alice.

"Hey we don't know what that thing is. We need to wait and scan it first." Alice said with worry lacing her voice. John turned to meet her gaze as their helmets golden visors lightened up to show their eyes through the large curved slim screens.

He nodded before speaking "I agree but we don't have time for that. The covenant is going to realize something's up when their dig team doesn't check in. We should grab what info we can before reinforcements show." Alice slowly released his arm and nodded meaning that she understood.

As soon as she let go John raised his hand and pressed it against the sphere. The bright blue tiles of the sphere glowed brighter under John's touch. The light outlined his hand before expanding. Were it not for the Spartans polarized visors they would have been blinded for a moment. The Spartans stepped back as a reflex while the light expanded and before they knew it a large holographic display of different planets and star systems appeared around them. Kane whistled at the impressive display while Wyatt was awestruck.

Wyatt then spoke "holy hell, it's a star map."

John looked closely at the three dimensional map before pointing just above them "look that's where we are right now." The rest of the Spartans looked up at the holographic image of the world they were currently on. A line then shot from the hologram and traced itself past several star systems before stopping at another system.

"What the hell's that line doing captain?" Jones asked. John simply shook his head slowly before replying "don't know, maybe it's a plotted course that the forrunners tookâ€œ!" He looked closely at where the line had stopped "â€œand it stopped at the Procyon system? That was where the colony Arcadia was located before the covenant glassed it and took the system."

The term _"glassed" _was used whenever a covenant bombarded the surface of a planet with a beam of plasma that melted and burnt the surface giving the world a glassy look. A planet being glassed usually only happened when covenant warships destroyed the UNSC naval warships in space above the planet. That and when they didn't want to bother with sending troops to clear the world. Being on a planet that was being glassed meant one of three things. You should get far enough underground where the beam can't reach you, evacuate to a surviving ship in space, or you're going to die with the rest of the planet. If planet was glassed then it would take years and possibly decades before the atmosphere of the world can become stabilized. It would take even longer for the planet to become habitable once more. The covenant would glass a planet even if they still had forces on the ground. It's a cold tactic the covenant are well known for.

It was Alice's turn to speak "Arcadia was glassed over three years ago so what could the covenant find in that system now?"

John kept his gaze fixed on where the Procyon system is located "there were other worlds there, maybe the covenant is after something on one of them. Either way its bad news for us, we need to evacuate all forces back to the ship and get to the Procyon system ASAP."

Kane suddenly looked at John "we're pulling out? Are we seriously going to leave this world for the covenant to take?" John didn't like leaving a fight either especially if it was with the covenant. His visor turned back to solid gold instead of being transparent.

"I don't like it either but that's where the covenant is likely heading. Besides we're in the outer colonies, there's more than likely no UNSC forces to back us up in a pinch. I would rather not lose my ship and be stuck on this planet and get glassed."

Kane understood the captain's reasons and shook his head accordingly before replying "good point so what are we waiting for? Let's go stick it to the covenant." John smiled underneath his helmet "yeah _let's_." He then pressed a button which connected his com system back to his ship's "Saline, I got a present for you, a forunner stellar map that points us to the Procyon system and near Arcadia. Plot us a course and pull all forces back to the Conviction."

Saline immediately answered back "_recalling all surface squads and plotting course for arcadia, aye sir._"

John and his team left quickly were clear of the structure just before covenant reinforcements arrived to see their handy work.

After they made it back to the pelican that was under the cover of the blizzard he got into the pilots seat and closed the back hatch when his entire team was seated.

A few moments after he took off and the pelican was on its way out of orbit he spoke over TEAMCOM "hey Kane, ready to give the covenant our good bye gift?" Just before they left the structure John had told Kane and the rest of his team to line the walls and the artifact with C-12 shaped charges and detonate them with a remote detonator on his order.

"Holiday's here early for those bastards" Kane said while his thumb was millimeters above the red trigger button on the stick-like detonator.

"Blow them to hell," John ordered.

Kane smiled as he pressed the button "with pleasure." Moments before Kane had pressed the button several squads of covenant troops were inside the structure and approaching the artifact. When they finally noticed the explosives it was too late. The charges had completely destroyed the interior of the structure and caused the mountain it was built in to cave in. The blast had reached outside through the entrance to the structure and engulfed all the covenant forces within ten meters in flames. John looked at their handiwork from the aft camera on the pelican and fed the video feed to his team, they all were amused by the destruction they had caused to the covenant.

"Merry Christmas Saber" John said as he flew the pelican back through orbit towards his ship.

As the pelican docked in one of the many hangers aboard the two and a half kilometer long ship Saline spoke to John through his helmet's com system. "Captain, eighty-five percent of our forces has been recalled." John made his way to the bridge of the ship. As he walked into the medium sized room he stopped next to his chair the _"hot seat" _was what people often called it. The seat was located at the center of the room. Of course John never used it while wearing his thousand pound armor for the seat would snap clean off the floor it was bolted to if the ship made the slightest turn or shift in momentum. The room was filled with monitors and screens along with a small team of people at separate consoles typing at keyboards.

A young woman who sat to the captain's right turned back to face him "sir, course plotted for the Procyon system and awaiting your order." Lieutenant Sarah Hawkins was the navigational officer aboard the UNSC Righteous Conviction. Her light blonde hair was maintained at the sixteen centimeter length that regulations would allow and her steel blue eyes always showed how serious she is. She was the best shot and the best navigator in her graduating class at Luna. Her navigation and marksman skills show that she is definitely more than just a pretty face.

Lieutenant Gregory Miles manned the weapons station on the bridge. He had black buzz cut style hair and green eyes that meant business. He then turned to give his report as well "weapons systems are operational, MAC cannon is hot. Archer missile pod hatches open and

ready to fire. Mass Driver is primed." He wanted to test the newly installed Onager cannon against a covenant ship and blow the poor covey bastards to hell with every fiber of his being. The cannon was also known as the Mass Driver. He would hold off on that however until John ordered it.

Lieutenant Miranda Hawkins stood post at ops. She was the twin sister of Sarah except her hair was up in a small ponytail and her eyes were green but just a serious. She and her sister had entered and graduated from Luna at the same time and both showed fierce determination and fiery spirits along with above average skill. That means they could keep their cool in a tight situation and John appreciated that. He couldn't bear to part the two anyways seeing how close they were so he accepted both of them onto his ship with open arms. He remembered how hard it was for him to part with his own family back on earth. Miranda gave her report "all forces accounted for captain, we're ready to dust off."

Manning the com station was Lieutenant Jacob Harlot. He kept a shaved head and his blue eyes showed that he took his post seriously. The man was one of the best communications officers that graduated from Luna. He could pick up on an intercept a transmission faster than anyone in his class. He was not however nearly as efficient as an A.I. such as Saline but John would need the man's talent regardless. "No pings or hails yet sir. Sending mission report back to Fleet Com HQ with your permission," he said.

John nodded his head while replying "send it."

Harlot began typing away at his console "it's away."

Saline's ghostly holographic image then appeared next to John above the cylinder by his chair known as a 'holo tank.' She began to speak "All hands ready and waiting captain. Course plotted and engines are hot."

John turned to her and spoke "take us out of here."

Saline simply replied "spinning up FTL drive, aye sir. You better hold on it might be a bumpy ride." John nodded as he looked back out of one of the five large windows on the bridge and took a long look at the planet they had to leave.

"I'll be back, just hold on," he whispered to himself as the steel blast shields covered the windows. The room darkened considerably as the ship shuddered multiple times just before a large pitch black portal with a dark blue outline appeared in front of the ship. The Righteous Conviction then flew into the portal and entered slip space, heading towards the crew's new destination.

3. Section II

Section II: Where the truth lay hidden

0230 hours January 31, 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Procyon System, High orbit above Arcadia

John awoke to a blurry red light as his cryogenic tube opened its hatch and he stepped out after peeling his back off of the form

fitting gel bed. Wisps of fog filled the large rectangular room that was lined with dozens of cryogenic tubes for the ship's crew. He doubled over and began coughing violently. Not long after he started coughing a clear string of liquid flowed from his mouth. The liquid was called cryo inhalant, it was meant to be swallowed after regurgitating, the liquid would replace any nutrients lost in cryogenic sleep.

It tasted horrible however and that was one of the few things that John would openly complain about. The first thing the captain noticed was the cold, refreshing air of the cryogenics bay over his bare body. Clothing and anything that would cover the skin was usually not recommended to be worn in cryo sleep for risk of being 'freezer burnt'.

John breathed steadily and with each breath he took, a small cloud of fog appeared and disappeared in front of his face. He then looked around to notice that all of the other pods were already open and thawed out. Soon after he made this realization he heard Saline's voice over the speaker to his right "sleep well captain?" she asked.

John smiled "yea if you like waking up to the taste of that god awful inhalant. Otherwise I feel great."

Saline was quick to reply "then you best get ready. We've arrived in orbit around Arcadia."

John then hung his head down low "yeaâ€¦back to work" he whispered to himself.

"Something troubling you sir?" Saline asked with a slightly worried tone.

John quickly stood up and stretched "no, just wondering when this is going to be over." Despite being an artificial intelligence Saline was one of John's friends and found she was often concerned for his well-being with the pressure he was constantly under.

"Well you could always take a break and chat with me for a while," she said. John laughed "if I sat down to talk to a 'smart' A.I. like you 'for a while' my head would probably spin worse than having a hangover." He replied jokingly.

"Well don't worry captain I'm sure I can dumb things down for you," Saline replied sarcastically.

John just smirked as he made his way to the showers "I was joking but yea maybe sometime whenever we're not fighting aliens and insurrectionists then I'm sure we can find something to 'chat' about."

John was cleaned up and dressed in his Spartan matte black form fitting suit within ten minutes. The suit was what he wore underneath his armor, there are several magnets on various places to attach and seal his armor on to. He constantly wore it in case he needed to equip his armor in a hurry. John then strode on to the bridge and was much quieter since he didn't have his armor equipped "Status report Sarah," he said. The navigational officer jumped slightly because no one had really heard the captain step onto the bridge, the crew's

focus was on Arcadia. She was also not used to being called by her first name however since there were two Hawkins' on the bridge John had taken to calling the twins by their first names.

"We are holding in geosynchronous orbit above Arcadia captain or rather what's left of it." John eyed out of the window and felt uneasy from looking at the glassy surface of a planet that was once home to millions of people before the covenant arrived.

Saline's ghostly image appeared next to the captain above the holo tank with her arms behind her back "Captain I have completed scans of the planet and have found no signs of life or covenant cruisers as of yet." John looked back down at his monitor that showed him the status of the ship. Hull integrity is at one-hundred percent, weapons systems fully operational and online, engines burning at sixty percent to conserve power, and all stations reporting on time. The Conviction was in the best condition as possible and John could only hope the crew was as well. The ship was equipped with experimental shielding technology which resembled the covenant shields that protected their ships. John did not however know how much punishment the shield would take before collapsing and he was in no hurry to test it.

He then spoke up, "pull us out of orbit Lieutenant."

"Aye sir" Sarah answered. She briskly typed away at her console and within moments everyone felt a slight pull as the ship shifted to port thus leaving orbit around Arcadia.

John spoke up once more, "Saline scan the system and look for any unusual activity, covenant or otherwise."

Numbers and data streams flowed across Saline's ghostly image as she began scanning "aye sir." Several moments passed and John waited with baited breath. Swiftly Saline turned to John with a slightly worried expression "captain, I've picked up several covenant cruisers orbiting an unknown planet nearby."

John then turned to her, intrigued "unknown?"

Saline continued her scans "according to the last record we have of this system, that specific planet was never here, at least not before we lost the system three years ago." John certainly wanted to know what was going on and how the planet just appeared in the system in the three years since he had last seen Arcadia. "Sarah plot a course towards the opposite side of the planet as the covenant and give me best speed, we're doing a fly by drop. Saline, send word to the Spartan teams to load up and get the pelicans prepped." John ordered. "I'll meet them there."

Saline began to glow slightly "already on it sir." John nodded before heading back out of the bulkhead door leaving the bridge. While on his way to the armor bay to suit up in his Mjolnir armor Saline called over the speaker closest to him in the corridor "fifteen minutes out captain." John picked up his pace into a break neck sprint "noted" he called out, there was no way he was going to miss out on a ground operation with his troops. He preferred fighting with his boots on the ground as did most Spartans. Thirteen minutes later John was clad in his crimson red armor with his assault rifle in hand. He was also equipped with an M90 shotgun attached to the

magnets on the left side of his armored back. John packed extra small black pouches that adorned the lower part of his chest and his thighs. Each pack carried extra ammunition magazines and shells for his shotgun while the medium sized pack on his lower back carried several grenades and a LOTUS anti-tank mine. He was prepared for nearly anything on the surface of the planet.

His com made a popping sound in his ear as Saline opened his com channel and spoke "captain tee-minus sixty seconds."

John then pressed a button on his helmet and replied "roger that." Suddenly the ship began to shudder and shake violently and alarms flared all across the ship. "Saline what happened? Are we under attack?"

A moment passed before he got a reply "negative, we're caught in some sort of gravity well and are being pulled towards the planet!" she was definitely more than alarmed.

Gravity tethers maybe? Wait, what about the covenant on the other side of the planet?" John asked.

"They were on an intercept course before they were caught as well. I'm reading signatures from several small towers on the planet's surface. It appears they are some sort of gravity pylons and are the source of what is pulling towards the planet" she reported.

John thought for a moment "all right those towers are our top priority; I'm taking two teams to the surface to neutralize them."

Saline was quick to reply "sir I have already located all three of the pylons that I believe to be pulling us in. You might need explosives to take them out. I've already sent the coordinates to the docked pelicans."

John quickly grabbed a large backpack and stuffed it full of C-12, and mines along with the detonator. "Captain!" John turned to see the rest of his team including Alice running towards him, each of them already geared up in their armor with their weapons on their backs.

John tossed the explosives filled pack to Kane "take that , we might need it!" Kane inspected the pack before nodding and slinging it over his shoulder. "Spartan fire teams Echo and Foxtrot report to the hanger and gear up. Carry as much explosives as possible, we're going to need it. Get to pelicans zero-one, two, and three on the double! The pelicans are programmed with your assigned targets. This is a possible demo op, there's no time to waste. All hands to battle stations! We're going in for a hot drop!" John barked over the ship wide com systems.

Within ten minutes the other two teams of Spartans were loaded up and on their respective pelicans and the ship was bustling with activity. "Let's go Spartans!" John yelled over his helmet's com system to the other two teams. He took the pilot's seat of his pelican and strapped in with Alice in the co-pilots' seat just behind him. While he did this, the three pelican's four blocky engines roared to life and the back hatches closed.

When launch preparations were complete the floors beneath the pelicans opened swiftly and the drop ships fell through. The Spartans in the back compartments all felt a fast and violent jerk followed by intense shaking from the sudden free fall. Were it not for the reinforced harnesses that the Spartans were strapped into, the weight of their armor and the force of the pull would have ripped them clean from their seats. As soon as the pelicans left the hanger they quickly tilted downward towards the planet and the shaking eased up. John turned his head and yelled through the door that lead to the cockpit "Here we go Saber!" The pelicans flew at top speed in the direction of the planet's surface.

"John, multiple radar contacts, dead ahead!" Alice yelled. John noticed them soon enough as they were hard to miss. Dozens of metallic spheres emerged from the planet's atmosphere and were headed straight for John and his teams. The spheres had several glowing line patterns on them along with a circular red glowing lens that decorated the center of the sphere, it looked like an eye. The spheres all had three angular flat booms surrounding the spheres while being equal lengths apart. John reopened the com channel "pilots look out, incoming defense drones!"

A distinct male voice broke over the radio _"Foxtrot one here, I copy team leader._" Then a female voice filled the helmet's speakers soon after _"Echo one confirms visual on intercept craft. Brace for evasive maneuvers!"_ The center red lens on the leading sphere glowed bright before a bright, red energy beam erupted from it and soon the other 'sentinels' followed. The pelicans shook violently as they maneuvered left and right dodging the beams of red hot energy. One hit from one of those beams could knock the drop ships right out of the sky.

"Return fire!" John barked as he fired the nose mounted chain gun of his pelican while the other two did the same. The hailstorm of bullets pinged and bounced off of the sentinels as they struck an invisible wall between them and the mechanical drones.

John then yelled over the com systems "hold fire! They have shields, bullets won't do a damn thing, switch to Anvil missiles!" Just as he said that two angled rectangular hatches popped open revealing eight paralleled holes in each wing of the pelican. As soon as he locked onto one of the sentinels John spoke quietly hoping the missiles would work "stop this you tin bastards." The pelican shook as it fired two missiles from its launchers. The missiles streaked through space leaving twin trails of exhaust in their wake. When the missiles struck the sentinel two large explosions engulfed the lone guardian along with several more that were surrounding it. The explosions shook the pelicans slightly but otherwise did no harm. When the smoke finally cleared there were bits and pieces of the metal drones that once stood in the pelican's way floating about.

The two other pelicans to the left and right of John's followed his example and released their ordnance as well. This time twice as many streaked through the blackness of space, more followed after and took out scores of the spall drones. When the sentinels began to scatter and fall back to the planet John spoke over the com systems once more. "The path is clear, gun it Spartans! Keep a sharp eye, those things could be back soon with sompany!" Just as he said this, the engines of the pelicans flared white hot as they were pushed to their limits. The pelicans began to become slightly red and equally red

streaks following them as they entered the atmosphere of the unknown planet. The surface of the planet looked like it was covered in thick jungles with the occasional opened area near a large body of water.

The female voice returned over John's helmet speakers. _"Echo team branching off."_ The pelican to John's left began to veer off far left towards the pylon they were supposed to destroy.

The male voice spoke right after "_Fire team Foxtrot moving to target location."_ The right side pelican then took its leave and flew off towards the right. Saber team's pylon however was dead ahead only half a mile away.

The male voice soon returned to John's helmet with a slightly panicked tone _"Foxtrot one here, those drones are back, they look a bit different though, smaller. Our bird is hit but no casualties. The right engine is dead, touching down half a click from the target LZ."_

John quickly replied "roger that Foxtrot be careful down there, we'll rendezvous with you for evac after our target has been eliminated." The voice replied with a large amount of static breaking up the sentences into bits and pieces

_ "â€|.copyâ€|vingâ€|..targetâ€|..willâ€|op...greenâ€|smoâ€|..evac
â€|..." _

John checked his helmetâ€|..everything was in working condition he then shouted over the open channel hoping that Foxtrot could hear him "Echo, Foxtrot, be aware, the jungle is possibly messing with our comms. I repeat the jungle is causing possible interference with com systems. Pop green smoke if your pelicans get fragged and you need an evac."

Echo team's leader replied _"roger that captain, thanks for the heads up."_ Saber team then reached its destination and landed in front of a large yet thin pillar like structure that stuck out of the ground. The pillar looked like it was emitting a blue energy beam from the top of it that faded out the farther the beam went. '_The gravity beam'_ John thought. As the pelican's engines died down John and the rest of his team unlatched their harnesses and filed out the back of the drop ship as the hatch opened. Now John realized how the jungle was wreaking havoc with communications. It was enormous; the foliage easily stood half as tall as the large structure they had landed near. With all of the creatures that likely lived in the jungle that meant that motion sensors will probably be useless.

That assumption was spot on, John's motion sensor was filled with activity. Too many yellow dots moved to count the number of readings. '_Dam'n _John thought, '_no way to tell when those drones will sneak up on us.' _"Let's move it Saber!" he ordered. They approached a strange looking door with multiple glowing lines decorating it with a green pentagon shaped line at the center with several lines connecting to the middle. As John approached it the door split into three sections and retracted with a hiss. His team stepped inside and much to his surprise the interior of the structure looked very similar to the one they found on Eridanus III minus the ice and mountains.

John led his Spartans down a series of lighted ramps before coming

across another door similar to the one at the surface. The door slid open as Saber team stepped through with their weapons drawn and scanning for targets. All clear. Wyatt noticed some sort of blue holographic terminal at the center of the structure; it was rounded and rectangular in shape. "Captain, look!" he said as he pointed towards the terminal.

John and his team cautiously approached it before he spoke "yeah, definitely forunner." He examined the terminal and noticed a blinking green 'button' at the center of it. He reached out and placed his hand on it. The light stopped flashing and the terminal turned red. Suddenly the entire structure shook lightly as lights went out and the beam shut down. Once the shaking stopped John turned back to his team "mission accomplished, now let's go assist foxtrot."

As the Spartans turned to leave however, four large hexagonal metal blocks emerged from left and right walls. The lids on the blocks parted and out came four more sentinels. These sentinels were different than the ones they encountered in orbit. They were not even half the size as the intercept craft and unlike the ones before, these sentinels were not large spheres with booms floating around them. These sentinels had two 'arms' with grapple like fixtures at the end of them and an undercarriage with what John had guessed to be a weapon. He was right as the undercarriage shone yellow before discharging a bright yellow beam. John and his team ducked and rolled in different directions.

One of the beams grazed John and the shield meter in his HUD dropped by almost a third. "Return fire!" he yelled as he leveled his assault rifle and squeezed the trigger in intervals, firing in short controlled bursts. The rounds pinged off the sentinel's shining blue shield but John did not let up his assault. Just before the sentinel started to charge its beam once more its shield gave way with a popping sound. As the shield dropped the remainder of John's bullets peppered the sentinel's center along with its undercarriage. The bullets had ripped the sentinel to pieces. The flurry of rounds hit its anti-gravity generator and sent it flying into one of its fellow drones causing them both to crash into one of the blocks they had emerged from in turn causing it to explode as well. Bits of metal and debris pinged and bounced off of John's armor along with the walls as he reloaded his weapon. By the time he was done his team had finished off the remaining two sentinels.

John noticed three of the blocks were still open and yelled to Kane "Kane, frag those holes!" John reached into his medium sized pouch and pulled out two grenades. He primed both before tossing one each into two of the holes as Kane through his into the third. Plumes of fire and smoke erupted from the 'pipe' like tubes as the explosions ripped them to pieces, preventing more sentinels from going through them. "Let's move Saber!" John ordered. Within a minute, the Spartans were back to their pelican and strapped in with no further resistance. The drop ship's engines roared to life as it took to the sky while the back hatch closed.

John then received a transmission from Saline _â€|.captain? Do you read? You have two minutes before we impact the surface of the planet, please hurry!"_ worry was evident in the A.I.'s voice.

John replied quickly "Hold on Saline! I read you loud and clear. Our communication was cut off momentarily. The first pylon is down. I

repeat, the first pylon is down, moving to the third."

Soon after he finished speaking, Echo team's leader's voice broke back over the speakers _"Echo team reporting the target is neutralized. We ran into light resistance but no injuries or casualties to report." John replied quickly "Echo, form up on me, we need to head towards Foxtrot's objective to assist immediately." John then looked to the sky to notice the Righteous Conviction flying through the atmosphere with large red streaks trailing it. Echo team's pelican soon caught up with John's as they headed east towards the last pylon and where Foxtrot's pelican was located.

"_Yes sir,"_ Echo one replied. John soon spotted a trail of smoke not far ahead

"Echo, that smoke ahead must be Foxtrot's pelican. Touch down and look for anyone around there."

Echo team's pelican began to descend as the pilot replied _"right away captain."_

Saline's voice then broke out into a panic as she spoke _"captain! We only have thirty seconds until impact!"_

John then yelled "damn it!" the pelican was a mere one-hundred feet from the last pylon just before it was deactivated. John released a breath he didn't know he was holding. It fogged his gold visor slightly before clearing. "The last pylon is down, any effect?" he called out.

Saline immediately answered _"negative effect, we're still heading for the planet! All hands brace for impact!"_ John looked up at his massive ship while slamming his palm against window, cracking it.

"No!" he called but Saline's voice broke back over the speaker, she sounded surprised. _"Captain I don't know what you did but the planet it'sâ€|.it's opening and we're being pulled inside."_ John was about to call back before he noticed his ship, the Righteous Conviction looked as if it was sinking into the planet from his view point.

Saline called back once more _"captain I recommend you get back to conviction immediately before the planet closes again."_

Just as she finished speaking John noticed a streak of green smoke emerge from near the pylon and immediately landed near it "roger that Saline." Just as he landed the back hatch to his pelican opened up and all six members of fire team Foxtrot piled in quickly. Each of them was clad in faint green Mjolnir Mark VI armor and wore Mjolnir Mark V helmets. The leader was obvious to make out due the twin darker green stripes that adorned his chest plate and the single dark stripe on top of his helmet.

"Thanks for the lift captain," The man said. John replied "no problem Jeremy glad you and your team made it out in one peace. Echo do you read? We have Foxtrot, all personal accounted for, rendezvous with and follow the Conviction immediately."

Echo team's leader soon replied _"will do captain, give my

compliments to Foxtrot for keeping their asses alive." _

Jeremy laughed before replying "Thanks Amy, glad you and your team are safe too, see you back on the conviction."

Amy immediately called back _"see you boys and girls there."_ John soon saw what Saline was talking about when his and Amy's pelican were on the starboard side of the Conviction. The planet had indeed opened up, much like the doors John had encounter at the pylon. The Conviction along with the pelicans were flying through a large dark hexagonal tunnel that lead deeper into the planet. It looked metallic and was covered in bright lines and glyphs, the tell-tale signs of it being forunner. The rest of the Spartans piled up to look out of the cockpit into the dark abyss.

Saline soon broke the silence _"Captain I recommend returning to the Conviction immediately." _

John answered back "agreed, heading back now."

Minutes later John's and Amy's pelican soon docked back inside the hanger through the starboard blast doors that opened to large spaces. The engines died down and the hanger filled with the sounds of footsteps as many marine technicians rushed towards the drop ships to inspect them. The back hatches opened up and all nineteen Spartans piled out.

John immediately called out "Alice! Amy! Jeremy! You're with me! Ops room! The rest of you get a breather but be ready to ship out at a moment's notice. " The Spartans scattered, most of them heading back to the armory while the rest stayed to help inspect the pelicans. Echo team's Spartans were the same color and had the same armor configuration as Foxtrot's but Amy, their team leader had blue lines instead of dark green. As the four Spartan leaders walked through the halls of the ship they turned right in a narrow passage and entered a room about thirty feet away from the bridge.

The room looked much like the briefing room back on Eridanus III. It was filled with computer monitors, screens and had a holo map table in the center of the room. The room however had several windows along the wall opposite to the door for observation. It was not as big as the bridge or the observation deck but this was where a lot of the planning occurred on board the ship. As they crowded around the holo map table the four Spartans took off their helmets.

Jeremy had flat topped dark brown hair, green eyes and a small scar on his lower lip. His skin was slightly tanned. Amy however had hazelnut brown hair which came down to her chin and framed her face was held farther back on one side by a small, red butterfly hair clip. It was a keepsake that she has held onto since she was a child which John allowed her to wear, despite it being against uniform regulations. Her skin was lightly tanned, the same as Jeremy. Both of the Spartans looked young.

Saline soon appeared above the holo tank next to the table. "Salineâ€œ| " John said "â€œ|show us what we're dealing with." Saline waved her hand over the table and in an instant a holographic image of the planet they had entered appeared above the table. It began to play back the events that had happened.

"As you can see we were supposedly pulled into the surface of the planet from orbit by the three gravity tethers your teams deactivated." John watched the ship's descent closely as the pillars pulled it closer to the world, Saline continued. "But what we didn't know is that the planet itself was also pulling us into it and was using the tethers to amplify its gravitational pull. Acting more like targeting devices really."

John raised his hand slightly signaling a question "so let me get this straight, what we deactivated was not really tethers but gravity boosters instead?" Saline turned to him "no, they were both gravity tethers but were being double as enhancers for the planets gravity well. You were lucky they were focused on the Conviction, otherwise they would have aimed for you and pulled your pelicans straight into the ground, killing all of you." John felt a lump in his throat that he quickly swallowed. He and some of his Spartans had avoided a close brush with death because of his ship being a target.

In this case, lucky might be an accurate term for that event. Saline spoke once more "my scans indicate that the planet is several hundred kilometers deep and that there may be another world or base even hidden beneath the hollow surface. But as you've seen, this artificial world is indeed forunner."

John thought things over before speaking "we've never gotten reports of these forunner worlds before so how come one showed up at one of our systems? How could something this big move into another system?"

Saline for once took a second to think "actually reports show that the Spirit of Fire and its crew went missing in twenty-five, thirty-one and was declared 'lost with all hands' on February tenth, twenty-five, thirty-four. Maybe they stumbled upon a forunner world as well and couldn't find a way out of it."

John mulled it over but as he was about to speak Jeremy stepped forward "so what are you saying? We're stuck inside this planet with no way out?"

Saline turned to face the man "to be brutally honest that does seem to be the case."

"Stuck inside a giant ancient planet with god knows what inside of it and no way outâ€|.perfect," Jeremy replied sarcastically.

Amy then spoke up, "hey we made it in somehow so we just need to find a way to get out the same way we came in."

Saline then turned to Amy "an excellent idea Lieutenant. This planet has to have a control center. We just have to find it and deactivate the gravity well so we can escape."

John stepped forward, his eyes still studying the holographic image of the planet as it tracked the ship's descent through the large tunnel. "Not so fast, we're not going anywhere."

Jeremy couldn't believe what he was hearing "wait, why not?" he asked. Alice being John's wife and having spent so much time the young captain understood what he meant immediately and stepped forward to speak.

"John's right, we can't leave, not yet anyway. The covenant loyalists came here looking for something, something that could be a danger to the UNSC and all of our remaining worlds. That includes Earth. We need to find out what and either seize it for ourselves or destroy it."

John relaxed and was glad she caught that "exactly." He then smirked "I knew there was a reason I married you." He said while looking at Alice. Alice simply cocked an eyebrow "oh? I thought it was I who married you smart guy or did you forget who proposed first?" she said jokingly with a wide grin. John just stood there and chuckled slightly while his cheeks tinged slightly red.

John then got back to business and turned to Saline "how long until we reach the planet's core?" Saline replied "Unknown but we should—" She was cut off by the ships sudden shaking and rumbling and outside the window the Spartans noticed what looked to be an electric blue pulse that washed over the ship.

John was slightly worried "Saline what's the planet doing now?"

"Checkingâ€|.it'sâ€|.scanning us" Saline replied with a slight hint of confusion. John cocked an eye brow as he watched his ship passed through several rings with the blue current surging through them.

"Scanning? Scanning for what exactly?" he asked.

Saline was still trying to make sense of it herself "unknown but it seems as though we are nearing the end of the tunnel and should be approaching the core soon enough."

Alice spoke up "well that's at least some good news, I hopeâ€|."

John leaned closer to the window to get a better view "yeah I can see light up ahead. Saline tell the bridge crew to prepare the weapons systems immediately and tell the ODSTs to get prepped for their pods. Also tell all Spartan teams and marine forces to armor up and prepare for a fight."

Saline turned to him before replying "aye sir however, I already did that as a precaution just in case we would need them. I apologize for not notifying you sooner but as you said the jungle was disrupting communications so there was no way to reach you or the other ground teams. There was also no time to mention it when you got back on board." John smiled warmly at his A.I. who was also his friend before speaking "don't worry about it, just keep up the good work. I need people who can guess ahead of me. It keeps thingsâ€|interesting for lack of a better word."

Saline returned John's smile "thank you captain. I'm just glad everyone made it back to the ship in one piece." John straightened up as the ship was bathed in warm light upon exiting the tunnel. He and the other Spartans covered their eyes for second until they could adjust to the new source of light which was in fact the planet's core. John then noticed something forming a sort of cone around the bright core. The cone pointed downward and only half of the core was

visible at the top. The massive construct looked as if it had many levels to it.

"Whoa...Saline what is that around the core?" he said in astonishment.

Saline raised a hand to her temple before replying "scanningâ€|..itâ€| appears to be an ancient forunner city captainâ€|" she stated. This earned a whistle from Alice as she and the rest of the Spartans admired the massive collection of structures surrounding the large, bright molten ball of energy.

Amy then spoke "this could be funâ€|and dangerousâ€| "

4. Section III

Section III: The Floating City

1020 hours January 31, 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Procyon System, Interior of Unknown Forunner Planet

The UNSC Righteous Conviction had become freed of the force that had drug it inside the unknown world over half an hour ago. Every man and woman of the crew of over eleven-thousand kept a vigilant eye out through various windows and camera monitors; they knew something was going to happen eventually. The marine pilots were already in the cockpits of the pelican drop ships in multiple hangers even the Spartans'. The ones piloting the Spartans refitted drop ships had volunteered to so they would not have to leave the pelican behind or waste troops to guard the drop ship when the Spartans left it.

John told them to be careful but at the same time he thought it was a good plan. It would keep more boots on the ground or at least the floor of their destination, the floating forunner city the surrounded the planet's core. Pelicans were ready to airlift hundreds of troops to the city and drop vehicles and supplies if need be. Since the Righteous Conviction was a colony ship it was also equipped with large portable bases that it could deploy at the drop of a hat. Unfortunately since the bases were so large, that meant that there would be very few places to land them if any. The ship was also large enough to house equipment to help repair damaged UNSC ships including the ship itself.

Saline then spoke to John who was still in the ops room staring at the city "all forces are ready and waiting captain."

John nodded and turned to face her ghostly image "What about the covenant?"

Saline had a slightly troubled look about her "it would appear that the covenant also made it to the core though the bulk of their forces is still outside the planet or passing through the outer shell as we speak. They have several frigates accompanied by an Assault Carrier on the other side of the interior however." John looked down at his helmet; his eyes admired the large rounded features. He turned it to look at the top which had a rise on it which was decorated which many tiny dents. The triangles that adorned the sides of the rise had long since faded from black to a dark grey. He turned it once more to look at the angular breathers on either side of the mouth area, these

allowed him to breathe and operate in hazardous areas, still in perfect condition. He noticed the small out dent on the forehead of his helmet. It had a single dent in the center of it from the time he charged and head butted an elite, knocking it out cold.

John smiled and chuckled quietly to himself as he remembered the fond memory, the marines and ODSTs called him 'Ram' for weeks to come. He then looked at the thin golden visor with dark alloy underneath that covered the nose that was surrounded by armor. The crimson paint on his entire suit of armor had many white and black scratches on it from years of service, a small dent here and there. He was only twenty-six years old but he had been a Spartan and served for over six years since he was twenty along with his wife, Alice who was the same age. John held his helmet underneath his arm as the door slid open and he stepped out into the lonely corridor.

As soon as he stepped out however he was pulled to the side suddenly, causing him to drop his helmet. He soon found himself slammed and pinned to the wall as a pair of lips came crashing into his in a fierce deep kiss. He let it happen because he only knew of one person who would pull him aside while he was alone like that. He opened his eyes during the kiss and there she was, Alice. He knew she would do something like this eventually considering he couldn't even remember the last time the two could just sit down and talk, at least not without being shot at by the covenant.

John closed his eyes and eased into the kiss as a lone tear crept down his cheek, he didn't even have time to think about how much he missed her anymore let alone tell her because of the war with the covenant. As the kiss continued he remembered all of the fond memories he had with her, before they became Spartans. They grew up together and their families had been close friends and lived together under one large house since they were very young. They were best friends growing up until they turned sixteen and fell in love. Two years later they got married and two years after that they enlisted in the experimental early testing stage of the Spartan IV program. The program would go into full swing and become incredibly successful in the years to come. John rose in rank swiftly as did Alice and the terms of their enlistment stated that they would always serve together in the same unit up until John became a naval captain and was assigned his own ship. After that there was no chance of them being torn apart and would always be nearby whether it be on different continents or even planets in the same system if John had any say in the matter.

As Alice's lips slowly left John's his lips, he shuddered briefly under her absence. He slowly opened his eyes once more to notice that Alice's eyes were damp, indicating that she had been crying. It melted John to his core to see her like that but there wasn't much he could do to comfort her, at least not until their mission was over and they could actually rest. Alice then surprised John by reaching up her ungloved hand and wiped away at his eyes. She showed him her damp finger and it was only that John realized he had been crying as well. He dried his eyes as did she as he picked up his helmet and they continued to the hanger.

While Alice pulled her gauntlet over her hand and carried her helmet she turned to the captain and asked "how long have we been married John?"

He then turned to her with a warm smile as they continued walking "ten years, six months and three days.

Her mouth opened into a wide smile while she chuckled lightly "so you've been keeping count too? But I'm a bit disappointed."

John turned his head slightly to look at her with a raised eyebrow "why so disappointed?" he asked.

Alice then leaned on his shoulder and whispered "you forgot to count the hours, minutes and seconds we've been married" into John's ear.

The Spartan leader then laughed loudly before replying "isn't that a bit much?"

Alice's smile grew a bit wider "not for me|.ten years, six months, three days, nine hours and thirty-five seconds, thirty-six, thirty-sevenâ|"

John then raised his hand "alright, alright I get it, you got me this time. I owe you a drink when we get back."

Alice lightly jogged ahead of him a few feet before turning around and walking backwards "make it two and it better be the good stuff that I know you have stashed away for celebrationsâ|captain."

John's smile grew wider "deal, I've been wanting an excuse to open one of those for a while now.

They straightened up as they entered the hanger and slung their helmets onto their heads, with a hiss followed by a pop the two Spartans' helmets sealed themselves with the rest of their suits. John then spoke through his helmet to Saline "Alpha and Gamma companies are to advance via pelican to the city along with Spartan teams Echo, Foxtrot, Sigma, and Saber. Deploy the twenty-third Shock Troop Battalion of ODSTs"

He ordered. Saline's voice broke through his internal speakers so that only he could hear her "aye sir, I have something I need to ask however." T

hat got John's attention "shoot" he said as he hefted his assault rifle and a BR55HB SR Battle Rifle onto his back, the powerful burst fire weapon was equipped with an optic scope suited for longer range engagements. Saline then spoke "are you ok sir? I saw you and the commander in the halls via the cameras, crying. If you two need some time alone together I could temporarily take over commanding our forces for you."

John froze in his tracks before smiling under his helmet and answered "thanks Saline but I'll be fine, and that alone time for me and Alice will have to wait until we have some breathing room from covenant forces."

Saline's holographic form suddenly appeared next to John "Then I at least recommend taking me with you captain."

He replied instantly "no can do Saline, I need you here coordinating

the defense of the Conviction while I'm groundside."

Saline crossed her arms "there's no doubt going to be many forunner defenses and doors down there that your teams won't be able to open, I'm the only one on the ship who can do it."

John knew she had a point "all right after we secure a foothold and I find something I'll come back for you, until then you're staying here."

Saline looked pleased about his answer "aye aye captain."

Alice then approached John with her assault rifle out "so where am I going?" John looked up at her before replying "you're staying here, I need a capable leader in charge of the ship and I need someone with ship to ship and groundside combat experience both of which you have, so please remain here" he pleaded. Alice swiftly hugged him tightly, she knew he just didn't want her in harm's way and on board the conviction was the safest place possible in their situation.

"Okay" she said "just be careful down there."

John returned her hug and replied "I will." Alice then stood and ran straight for the bridge while John finished packing his gear into the many pouches he carried on his armor before.

John climbed into one of the Spartans' pelican's aft compartment where the troops sat. The drop ship was filled with Spartans and ODSTs. John yelled over his helmets speakers which also tied into the ships. "Let's send those covenant bastards to hell!" Then entire ship was excited as marines yelled _Hoorah _throughout the interior of the ship and in multiple air vehicles. The pelican's engines roared to life as the hatch of over half the pelicans on the ship closed. The hanger bay doors opened and literally hundreds of pelicans soared out of the side of the ship shaking violently like swarms of angry bees.

The drop ships moved incredibly fast towards their destination just as Saline contacted John "Sir Covenant forces are deploying towards the opposite end of the city.

John replied "let them try to stop us, tell the bridge crew to open fire on any covenant ships that get within range."

Saline took a moment to reply "they've been notified sir." White streaks trailed behind all of the pelicans as they flew towards the city. Within ten minutes the pelicans had reached their destination and landed in what looked like streets below towering sky scrapers at least to human eyes. Hundreds of marines, ODSTs, and Spartans piled out of the drop ships. Some of the drop ships dropped off vehicles ranging from Warthogs which were armored jeeps with mounted chain guns on the back and Scorpions, the UNSC's main battle tank. There were also Mongoose ATVs dropped off for reconnaissance operations. John climbed into the driver seat of one of the Warthogs as two Spartans occupied the gunner position and one the passenger seat.

Three ODSTs did the same with another 'hog' that was right behind them. Suddenly John pressed his foot down on the pedal causing the

Warthog to make a squealing noise as the massive tires spun. The monsterous jeeps took off in between forunner structures looking for anything of interest leaving trails of dust in their wake. The armored jeeps passed by many path ways that branched off from the 'road' they were on. As the warthogs continued their journey John checked the names of the Spartans in his warthog.

Chief Petty Officer Jill Riley was the Spartan operating his warthog's chain gun turret. John remembered reviewing her service record. Over twenty high risk missions accomplished since becoming a Spartan which was nothing out of the ordinary for a Spartan. She did however hold off a small army of covenant forces with improvised mining explosives along with two other Spartans while a spaceport was evacuating civilians on a mining colony. Her reputation was good for not leaving anyone behind and was open minded to unconventional tactics. John was glad to have her along.

The Spartan in the passenger seat to John's right is Petty Officer First Class Thomas Brady, a veteran of three large scale battles against the covenant before becoming a Spartan. He was an ODST before hand and had an exceptional combat record. He was also known for speaking his mind and contradicted orders more than once when lives were at stake. He was a soldier with heart and John appreciated that. The two Spartans had identical Mjolnir Mark VI armor including helmets that resembled the Mark IV helmet that was adapted for Mark VI armor. Both sets of armor were olive green much like a majority of John's Spartan forces aboard the Righteous Conviction. He had requested the special Mjolnir armor for his Spartans to make them more effective instead of using the standard armor given to Spartan IVs. The armor itself was extremely expensive along with the sheer number of Spartans that were stationed on John's ship made this project costly. The project itself however had proven to be well worth the costs as John's Spartans had a reputation for accomplishing high risk missions with little to no casualties.

John's warthog abruptly stopped as he came across a very large pillar like structure similar to the ones he encountered on the outer shell. This structure however was easily five times bigger than the previous ones. It looked embedded in the massive wall to left of the path that the captain was on. The building had a similar looking door as before. "Well well, what do we have here?" John quietly asked. He then stepped of the jeep as did the two Spartans accompanying him. As he approached the door John clicked a button his helmet "hey Alice we found a large structure that looks like the ones we saw before, I'm going to check it out."

Alice replied quickly _"the area around you is clear for now we expect that to change very soon so be careful, I'll send Echo team to provide support." -

John turned to face the three ODSTs "You three are with us, leave a beacon for Echo team to follow."

One of the ODSTs, Brian Taylor, a gunnery sergeant snapped a crisp salute "yes sir!" he said. The ODST quickly went to work as he took a small metallic box like object from his backpack and placed it on the ground. He pressed a green button next to a red one which made the box unfold. Four leg-like clamps extended out and elevated the box as the top opened up to let an antenna extend skyward. The antenna had a small curved fin that expanded around the antenna creating a small

satellite dish that began to spin slowly. "Beacon's up captain," the man reported.

John nodded before moving towards the door "all right we might find more of those defense drones inside so keep your eyes peeled and your heads down." He placed his hand on the center of the door and the center glowed green before the door split open. "Let's move" he said. John and his team walked deeper into the facility, down clear ramps that looked as if they would fall through when stepping on them.

As the team approached another door John heard Amy speak over their com link _"sir, be advised, multiple phantoms are in bound to your location. Echo team is not far behind, maybe two, three minutes out."_

John replied "thanks for the heads up Amy but don't bother following if there's too many for you to handle. Tread carefully."

John proceeded to place his hand on the opening mechanism as Amy radioed back "_will do captain." _The doors slid apart with a hiss as John's team entered the room, assault rifles raised. The room looked to be a large chamber with what looked to be a medium sized terminal at the far wall. John approached it slowly and examined it. He looked about the holographic interface and saw different geometric shapes riddling the display. He reached up and pressed and yellow outlined green hexagon. Suddenly the structure began to shake and the walls behind the terminal began to move. The walls parted to reveal a long dark passage way. John walked towards it and activated the flash light that was on his assault rifle just below the barrel. He scanned down the passage way but saw no further movement. His team went down the hallway and came across another large chamber. Without warning, lights flickered on all over the chamber alarming the ODSTs who raised their rifles to look around.

John looked over his shoulder and laughed "you boys seem pretty jumpy" he said.

Sergeant Taylor was the first to lower his rifle "well, we're not incased in armor like you Spartans. So I don't feel like getting shot at."

The captain chuckled before replying "point taken." He then noticed something at the center of the room. There was horizontally stretched hexagonal platform in the center of the room. It stuck a few inches out of the floor and had two pillars on either side that connected from the floor to the ceiling. John also noticed a small terminal on the platform. Upon closer inspection revealed the platform to be some sort of elevator. John then contacted Alice "looks like we found an elevator that will take us deeper into the facility."

Alice was quick to reply _"noted, but perhaps you should wait for Echo team John."_

John stepped onto the platform as did the rest of his team "no time, we need to find what the covenant are looking for and fast. Echo team you read me?"

Amy soon spoke up _"loud and clear sirâ€|. " _Amy's voice was cut off by an explosion.

John became worried "Amy?! Status report, do you need reinforcements?"

Amy soon spoke again _"negative, we got caught by a banshee and our bird was hit. No casualties. We've engaged covenant forces not far from your position." _

John turned back to the door his team had entered and was on his way towards it before Alice spoke once more _"John don't worry about Echo, I had four Hornets not far behind them, they'll be fine."

-

John replied with worry evident in his voice "no way, I'm heading back right now. Echo team hold on!"

John's helmet buzzed with static followed by the sound of more explosions and the short screaming sound of covenant plasma rifles. _"â€|.we'll hold position and wait for you captain. Wright! Keep your head down damn it!" _John and his team were outside almost immediately afterwards. All six of them loaded into their hogs and were backtracking to Echo team's location.

Within two minutes John spotted Echo team's crashed pelican, its right wing was nearly a melted, flaming slump from where the engine had been hit. The pelican was covered in many scorch marks from plasma. He then spotted an elite clad in silver armor hefting a large, bulky, orange cylinder that had a hook in the back which went over the creatures' shoulder. That was the fuel rod cannon, a covenant rocket launcher that fires green nuclear plasma torpedoes. If that thing fired on Echo, there would be no doubt that some of them would die. John tried to press his foot down on the petal even further only to find out that it was as far down as it could go. As John approached the elite he let go of the steering wheel and began to lean out the side of the vehicle. Within another few moments he braced himself and leapt out of the fast moving vehicle towards the elite. John tucked and rolled across the ground with a loud thud and began sprinting towards the elite at his maximum twenty-nine miles per hour. The elite leveled the green glowing large weapon on his shoulder and aimed it at Echo team's location and ignored the warthogs that just moved past him. Just as it squeezed the firing mechanism the elite heard the sound of metal hitting metal.

John reached out, grabbed the elite's arm with one hand and the large weapon with the other. He pulled upward causing the alien to point the gun to sky and fire. Heat washed over John as the large green plasma projectile left the weapon's chamber. John pulled his right fist back and straight punched the elite dead center in the head causing it to stumble backwards and drop its weapon. The elite tried to right itself from the dizziness it felt from the concussion John most likely had inflicted. John took this opportunity to charge the creature attempting to tackle it and give himself more control of the situation. The elite despite its dizzied state noticed John immediately and charged him as well. Both warriors locked arms around each other as they grappled and struggled to get an advantage over the other. John had heard the elites were just as strong as the Spartans physically but he never got into close combat long enough to find out. This time was different however; the alien was just as strong as John. He let up for a second to bait the elite in and as soon as he felt himself being pushed he maneuvered himself to be slightly under the creature. John then pushed up with all his might,

lifting the slightly larger alien off the ground with a hefty grunt.

John then threw the large creature to his left. The alien flew and rolled five meters away from John. John then ran and dove with his elbow outstretched attempting to drop the weight of his thousand pound armor on the elite in a single elbow drop that would kill it instantly. The elite managed to roll to side avoiding the fatal blow that caused a large dent in the floor. It stood up on its reverse jointed legs just as John righted himself as well. The elite looked as if it were smirking and extended its right arm. From the triangular bulge on top of the creature's gauntlet an electric blue spearhead like plasma blade extended from it. The blade itself extended to over a foot long and would cut through John's armor like paper. John drew his knife as well from its sheathe on his left shoulder and positioned himself to counter the elite. The elite poised to strike and leapt forward with its blade out. John charged as well except he dropped to the ground and slid between the elite's legs with his knife outstretched. His knife caught the alien's leg causing it to trip and fall.

As John turned over and began to get up the elite threw its leg outward and struck John in the head. The mighty blow sent John off his feet and knocked his helmet off. As he fought a wave of dizziness accompanying the blow he looked up to see the elite standing over him preparing to strike its plasma blade down on him. "And now you die demon" it said in a deep voice. John then heard a loud crack followed by a stream of smoke leading to the elite's head as sniper rifle fired and killed the creature. The elite's purple blood exploded from where the bullet exited and it fell to the ground, not moving.

John looked to his left to see Alice crouching in the back of a pelican wielding her SRS-99 AM rifle. "Move!" she yelled "I'll cover!" John didn't have time to question why she was there he just got to his feet and put his helmet back on. John pulled his assault rifle off the magnets on his back and started charging down the small hill to Echo team's crash site. He leveled his assault rifle while running and fired in short control bursts that caught grunts and jackals who had their back to him. The aliens were alerted to John's presence as they turned to fire. One of the jackals however was met with a rifle round to its head. It fell over next to two of the grunts as they tried unsuccessfully to hit the red Spartan with their plasma weapons.

John continued his assault while Alice picked off one of the elites. When he was close enough John pulled out a Frag grenade, he pressed the button to prime it and tossed it in between multiple jackals and grunts that were still facing Echo teams pelican. The grenade detonated sending shrapnel and bodies in several directions. A few more shots and the last of the covenant platoon had fallen dead.

As John stepped over many bodies of the aliens he approached Amy and noticed his team behind her. She looked a little worse for wear with her armor having charred spots all over it. Otherwise she seemed perfectly fine. "You all right?" John asked.

Amy nodded hear head before she spoke "yeah no casualties but the pilot's pretty banged up, we treated as much of his injuries as we could but he needs immediate evac." She pointed her thumb over her shoulder towards the injured man who laid on the ramp of the downed

pelican and clutched his side. John heard Alice's pelican land and he made a quick 'come here' gesture to her. Alice ran up to John and placed her rifle on her back.

"Sorry, I know you wanted me to stay on the ship but I thought you could use a hand."

John depolarized his visor so Alice could see his eyes as he cocked an eye brow "I had everything under control before you showed up." Alice laughed "yeah? Tell it to that hinge head who was about to carve you up like a turkey."

John smiled as he replied "looks like I owe you another drink huh?"

Alice then strode past him towards the injured man but placed her hand on John's shoulder for a second and said "damn straight."

John laughed "all right when this is over, till then keep your head in the game." He then joined her in walking to the injured man. As they both got close to the man they read Besenti on the upper part of his body armor, he was a regular marine pilot. John pulled up the man's Career Service Vitae. James Besenti was the man's name; he had an impressive record for only being a corporal. Participating in several high risk operations while flying under fire as diversionary tactics for civilian evacuation ops."How are you holding up Besenti?" John asked.

The marine choked before replying "I've been better sir. But just before my bird was shot down I saw phantoms heading to those ruins you were in." John made a mental note of what Besenti said.

He then turned to Alice "get Besenti to your pelican and escort him back to base then meet up with us at the ruins with the rest of Saber team." Alice nodded before gently picking Besenti up and carrying him off.

As they left Amy walked up to John "I hope Besenti will be all right, he's a damn good pilot. When that banshee fired its torpedo it would have hit the back of the pelican and probably would have killed me and half of Echo but Besenti turned the bird and the shot hit close to the cockpit. He saved the lot of us."

John turned back to Amy and nodded before speaking "remind me to give that man a promotion when this mission's over. He's earned it."

Amy nodded "will do captain."

Jill then came running up to John "sir, the hogs took too much fire and are a no-go."

John looked at her "then it looks like we're walking Spartans." He raised voice to get everyone's attention "all right boys and girls our rides are fried and we're on foot; we're heading back to those ruins! Move it!" he yelled. The Spartans and ODSTs made their way back to the ruins ten minutes later. As they approached however they noticed several phantoms leaving the area. "the hell?" he asked.

Brady then spoke "looks like they're running captain."

John nodded lightly "yeah...keep your eyes open."

As John and his team made it back down into the ruins where he was before Echo went down he spoke again "those covies wouldn't bug out for no reason, keep your eyes sharp people." They began moving through the passage way in the wall before John stopped at the edge. He turned the corner slowly and saw two jackals holding their round plasma shields on their right arms and four grunts. They looked relaxed and were not alert. John then whispered "let's follow them and see if they lead us somewhere," he said. John and his team followed the aliens down the elevator after it went down first. They continued their pursuit of the creatures through many large dimly lit corridors and through multiple large doors that they could probably fit a scorpion tank through. The pathways had led them deep underground, almost a full mile.

The aliens soon came to a halt just outside of a large trapezoid shaped door. The door slid apart and the jackals and grunts walked through. John followed close behind as did his team and just before the door shut they slipped through and hid behind a low wall. The room was a massive spherical chamber, there was a large green globe floating in the center with a ring around it and a walkway that lead to a platform in the center of the room. They continued observing the covenant forces. John counted one elite, four jackals and six grunts. John began to think about what to do before he noticed the elite approach what looked like a red holographic console just under the globe. He continued to observe the elite as it appeared to be frustrated. It seemed as though the elite could not activate the console as it pressed at a large triangular button. '_Power shortage maybe?' _John thought. He then made up his mind, wipe the covies and try to access that forunner console. He turned his helmet speakers off and spoke over TEAMCOM . "_Smoke em'" _he said. Shortly after the thundering sound of assault rifle fire filled the chamber as the jackals were the first to be killed. The elite was surprised as he turned around to see the humans gunning down his warriors. The elite let out a loud roar as it returned fire. The screaming of the bolts of plasma discharge from its rifle reached John's ears as he ducked behind the wall narrowly avoiding the plasma.

Amy rose up and opened fire, pelting the elite's shields. As she did a grunt primed a plasma grenade and tossed it toward the Spartans. "Move!" John yelled as he dove to his left out of the cover he previously had. The rest of the Spartans began to except for one.

William Wright turned to see the ODSTs. '_They won't make it.' _ He thought as he ran to the ODSTs. In one movement he picked up and threw two of the ODSTs a few meters away and turned to help the last one. As he turned however, the plasma grenade landed at his feet. The grenade detonated enveloping Wright and the ODST in a bright flash of blue. Wright flew backwards and hit the ground; much of his armor including most of his chest had been burnt clean off along with one of his arms from the elbow down. The ODST was nowhere to be seen, he was completely vaporized by the plasma.

"Wright!" Amy called but Wright didn't move. '_Damn it' _John thought before he remember he remember his situation. He had no cover and his assault rifle was on the ground while the elite had a clear shot at him. Quickly John dove for his weapon just as the elite fired. Two

bolts of plasma struck John in the side. His shields quickly dissipated as heat washed over his side. John grabbed his rifle as he landed and turned towards the elite. He opened fire on the creature. The first bullet struck home as it hit the elite dead center in the head which might have killed it if its shields were down. John continued his onslaught as the elite did the same. Many of the elite's shots had missed except for one that struck John's left shoulder pauldron. The plasma melted a large dent in the alloy but John did not let up. He continued fire until his assault rifle clacked. '_Empty' _he thought as he reached up and pulled the battle rifle off of his back while getting to his feet. The last few bullets from John's assault rifle had broken the elite's shields causing it to stagger backwards. John leveled his weapon and aimed through the scope directly at the elites head. Before the alien could react John squeezed the trigger.

With a short thundering burst the bullets struck the elite and chipped a piece of its helmet off. The elite staggered back even more as John walked forward while continuously pulling the trigger peppering the elite with bullets. John kept firing until his magazine was empty and the elite laid in a bullet riddled heap. The meter in John's HUD began to fill back up with a humming noise as his shields replenished themselves. He proceeded to grab his assault rifle and check the TEAMBIO screen in his HUD. It showed Wright's vitals had flat lined and the vitals for lance corporal Robert Hanson had completely vanished. He shook his head before approaching the console the elite's body was next to.

5. Section IV

Section IV: Unexpected Guests

1110 hours January 31, 2552 (Military Calendar)/ Procyon System, Interior of Unknown Forunner Planet

As he placed his hand on the same button the elite had, the console turned green. The railing behind it split apart as a circular lift rose from the floor below and stopped in front of John.

Just as John was about to step on the platform he heard Amy tell two of her Spartans to grab Wright's body and head back to base. He then heard Saline over his com systems. _"Captain, Spartan and marine teams have engaged covenant forces all around the city. Commander Wells is bringing me to you now sir."_

John responded quickly "roger that Saline, I think I'm close to wrapping things up down here." He turned to Amy "set two on guard at the door and the rest to hold position" he said.

"Sir" Amy replied with a knod. She then turned to her Spartans and the ODSTs "you heard the captain, Ackerman, Harling; you're standing watch. The rest of you form up on me, move it!" The Spartans and ODSTs moved quickly as they got into position. Ten minutes later Alice accompanied by the rest of Saber team arrived at the chamber. She approached John and handed him a small rectangular chip that had a glowing electric blue circle in the center of it.

"Here she is," she said. John examined the chip for a moment before inserting it into the equal sized slot in the back of his helmet. He

heard a click as the chip slid in and then felt a cool essence wash over his mind. John then heard Saline's voice "well it's been awhile since I've been in here. Looks like you've gotten a few upgrades to your neural implants since last I visited," she said.

John smirked "just wanted you to feel more at home."

Alice then spoke up "so what'd you find?"

John turned to her "don't know, some kind of elevator. I'm thinking it probably leads to a control room."

Alice strode past him towards the platform that waited by the control panel "then what are we waiting for?"

John quickly grabbed her and pulled her back just before she could step foot on the platform "hey! Wait a sec; we don't know how stable that platform is. I'm going first. Besides knowing you, you won't stay put when you get down there and will want to explore."

Alice nodded disappointedly "only a little but if you insist then go ahead."

She stepped aside as John walked forward to the platform. John was right, as soon as he was on the platform he felt a jerk and it began to descend quickly. "John!" Alice yelled as she tried to grab him but fell short. The platform sunk below the chamber and continued its descent until it reached a box like chamber that was a third of the size of the previous one.

As the platform came to a halt John examined the chamber. It was dimly lit and noticed an overhang of several rail less walkways above him. It looked as if there were doors above on the walkways as well. The overhang itself surrounded a large rectangular glass chamber that glowed green. John noticed green spores floating around inside the glass. _"A containment cell?"_ John thought. He stepped off the platform and as soon as he did the platform rose through the floor again.

When he turned back to the glass containment cell Alice's voice broke over the com systems "_John?! Are you alright? Can you hear me?"_

John replied "I'm fine Alice, simmer down. I found some kind of containment cell down here with some sort of spore in it. The lift went back up though so I'll wait for you to get down here."

A moment passed _"all right I see the lift; we're on our way down now."_

John continued to examine the tank "hey Saline what's in this thing?"

Saline spoke up "I was wondering when you were going to ask. I was beginning to wonder if you forgot about me. To answer your question however, unknown. I've been scanning since you first saw it. It's unlike anything I've ever heard of. There's no entry for it in my databases. My scans indicate that it is some type of super cell. Highly infectious so keep your helmet on."

As soon as Saline stopped talking the lift entered the room once more with Alice, Amy and the rest of their team. "What do we have?"

Alice asked. John turned to look at her "Saline said it's some kind of super cell, highly infectious so keep your helmet on."

Alice began to look at chamber "shame, and here I was thinking of getting some fresh air." John began to walk towards one of the doors in the chamber before turning around and noticing that Sergeant Taylor had his helmet off and was poking at it.

"Sergeant, get your helmet on now!" He barked.

Taylor turned to John with a worried look on his face "sir the breathers on my helmet stopped working, I think that plasma grenade did some damage to some of my helmets systems. It's totally fried."

John looked back at the chamber "Saline is he contaminated?"

Saline quickly replied "no he isn't, as long as those containers are intact and not breached then we should be fine. I don't know how the contamination will actually spread though, so we might not even be affected by it if we breathe it in. Just don't get trigger happy."

The captain tilted his head slightly, "right but I thought you said it was highly infectious?"

Saline quickly answered, "I also mentioned that it's not recorded in any database so even if it's an air based spore we don't know how it would affect us if we breathe it in."

John turned back to the door "then let's get the hell out of here."

Without warning static filled John's helmet followed by a female voice "_captain, Hawkins here. We shot some phantoms down that were heading for us. One of them is spiraling towards the lower levels of the facility. Look out for it._"

John replied as soon as she was done talking "I will, thanks for the heads up now pull all of our forces back to the conviction, there's a highly infectious bacteria down here I don't know how many more chambers are on the city."

Hawkins began speaking once more "_sir multiple teams have found containment units like the one you just mentioned. An ODST team lead by gunnery sergeant Hamilton disappeared after discovering a breached container._"

John was worried now "shit! Get everyone back to the ship immediately and into—" John was cut off by an explosion, the phantom that was hurdling towards the city suddenly crashed through the wall. The explosion sent John and his team flying backwards into a wall. John was dizzy, his head was throbbing and everything was blurry as he tried to stand. He then noticed that the container was breached. "Everyone move! Get out of here!" he yelled. As Taylor tried to move he breathed in some of the spores. The man began screaming in pain. John looked over and noticed Taylor's skin was turning a greenish

brown and his body was beginning to morph into something sickening. Brown mounds of skin erupted from his body along with red antenna like appendages that sprouted from his mouth. Soon the greenish brown skin enveloped his body save the antenna that was now sprouting from a small red hole. The sergeant's left arm had mutated into some grotesque multi tentacled appendage. "Taylor?" John said quietly as he looked at the creature. Without warning the creature lunged at John but was met with John's fist to the core of the creature. The creature was sent flying back into a wall with enough force to kill a human.

John looked down to notice his hand was covered in some kind of thick green liquid "what the hell?" He muttered to himself.

"John, it's not dead!" Alice yelled. John looked up to see the former sergeant standing up once more. He heard a yell and saw Amy charging the creature with the shotgun she had on her back moments before. The creature made a splotching sound as it ran toward her. Amy threw her armored boot straight forward and sent the creature to the ground with a loud thud. She pinned the creature with her foot and shot it point blank with her shotgun. It was still moving. She shot it three more times before the creature finally stopped moving.

She then turned to John "what the hell was that captain?!"

John continued to stare at the creature "I don't know but we need to get out of here now!" he grabbed his rifle and ran through one of several doors followed by the rest of his team as Alice picked the last ODST up and carried him so he wouldn't get left behind.

"Up you go" she said. John and his team had made it to another elevator when the ground started shaking.

"_Captain, the covenant are pulling their forces back and shooting at the city!_" Hawkins said over the com channel.

"Let's move people!" John said. When the elevator stopped there was a door directly in front of it. John and his team ran through it in a hurry to find themselves directly outside of their initial base with everyone evacuating.

"Captain" Saline said "I've intercepted multiple transmissions throughout the city; it seems that the infection we encountered earlier is known as the flood. Waitâ€|.captain the covenant is planning to destroy the city we need to leave, now!" John nodded as he continued running to an empty pelican.

"For once I agree with the covenant, let's blow this place to hell. Hawkins tell miles to prep the Mass Driver and tell all ground forces to not let any sign of infection on aboard the ship at all costs."

A moment passed before John got a reply, _"aye sir. Telling them now. "_

John was ten feet from the pelican before three large blue fire balls of plasma struck its side. The pelican erupted into a ball of fire as it exploded. The explosion sent John flying back into Amy. Both John and Amy struggled to stand up from the impact. As soon as John righted himself he helped Amy to her feet "you alright?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said.

John clicked a button on his helmet "Hawkins, pelican's fragged. We need an evac ASAP."

A moment passed before he got a reply _"captain, the covenant has an anti-air battery up. We can't send you a bird until it's down."_

John looked down for a moment, thinking. "Right, leave that battery to me."

Johns words were not missed by anyone but Alice was the first to speak "you mean us right?" she asked with worry evident in her voice.

John turned to her "not this time Alice I'm going solo, take the rest of our team and help the base fend off the assault until I get that battery down, a bird will pick you up."

Now she was really worried "wait, how are you going to get back to the ship then?" John pulled the chip containing Saline out of his helmet and handed it to Alice.

"I'll improvise, don't worry but here, I need you to take Saline and get her back to the ship as soon as you can. We can't afford to lose her and since you're going to be back before me I'm leaving her to you."

Alice stepped toward him and spoke in an irritated tone "I'm not leaving you down here John." John was inspecting his equipment but looked back up at her with his visor polarized so she couldn't see his face.

"There's no room for arguments here commander. Our troops need you, now goâ€|that's an order," he said with authority clear in his voice.

Alice trembled for a moment before looking back at him and spoke in a half angry and half sad quiet tone "yes sirâ€|." She turned away from him and began to walk back to their forward base with the rest of their team.

"Sorry," John said quietly as he rechecked his gear. Three magazines for his assault rifle, five for his battle rifle and one fragmentation grenade. _'Hope this will be enough,' _he thought. The captain began running along the pathways between the forunner structures that had bodies of Spartans, marines, ODSTs and just as many covenant corpses everywhere. John grimaced upon the sight, he never like it when people died under his command especially when he had thousands of lives depending on him.

John had been running for eight minutes before stumbling upon the cannon. It was a multi-plat formed circular structure with two floors and it was rather large. The first floor had three entrances to its interior. Inside was the shielded core that if destroyed would cause the cannon to explode a few moments after. The second floor was connected to the first by two circular 'ramps' and was without walls or cover save the support platform just above it that held the gun.

The cannon itself was sleek and heavy in design with two pincer like coils extending from its large base. Plasma was charged from the core and sent in between the coils in the form of projectiles.

"There it is," John said as he examined the forces surrounding the cannon. Eight grunts, three elites and four jackals by John's count. '_Easy enough,' _he thought. He lined up his battle rifle after kneeling next to a wall. His sights were focused on a jackal's head. He squeezed the trigger and the jackal dropped to the ground dead soon after. He moved on to the next jackal as soon as the previous one began falling. The air was filled with the thundering rhythm of his battle rifle's burst firing as he dropped three of the four jackals. The fourth jackal was barely able to raise its shield in time as John was beginning to line his sights on the creature. Normally John would prioritize elites but since he was alone he figured the jackals would be the most problematic. The reason being they could close in on his position more safely than the grunts or elites while being behind their shields.

The jackal returned fire causing John to dive to his right, behind a small six foot pillar sticking out of the ground. He looked down at the ammo counter on his battle rifle that is located just below the handle rail where the scope is attached. The counter showed that he had twenty-four rounds left in the magazine. He turned around the left side of the pillar and spotted an elite that was approaching his position in the open with its plasma rifle drawn. John opened fire; four of his shots had diminished the creature's energy shields while the fifth managed to catch it in the head just before it could reach cover. The elite merely fell to the ground and stopped moving.

The jackal along with a second elite opened fired as John's attention was focused on the charging elite. Just before John could pull back around the pillar two bolts of plasma had hit his shoulder and drained his shields by two-fifths.

Just as he was about to turn around to unleash the remainder of bullets his clip held he heard heavy footsteps close by. He turned to his right to see light bending only three feet from him. "Shit!" he yelled as he ducked barely dodging a plasma sword that would have decapitated him. The blade made of plasma was two half ovals that were mere inches apart and elongated as well as thin at one end. The blade of energy stuck into the pillar as it hissed and let off white wisps from its glowing form. The elite who wielded the blade deactivated its cloaking and suddenly became visible to John as it growled. John stared up at the large black armored alien before pushing his entire weight into the creature as he rammed it with his shoulder. The elite let go of the metallic hilt of its sword as it fell backwards with a loud thud. John was within three feet of the elite as he brought down the butt of his battle rifle into the side of its head, breaking two of its mandibles. The alien let loose a loud and feral growl as it grabbed the barrel of John's battle rifle when he had aimed it at the elite. It yanked the rifle free of John's grasp and threw it over its head far away from John. The elite lifted its leg up and kicked John away from it with its large two-toed, armored, scaly foot.

John flew back six feet and landed on his back with a loud grunt. He and the elite got to their feet at the same time. The elite's comrades did not open fire for fear of hitting their commanding officer. There both of them stood, staring each other down with no

weapon in hand. John then remembered his grenade he had in his pouch. As he reached for it however the elite began its charge towards him. The creature's armored, reverse jointed legs made loud thumping noises as John armed his grenade. When the elite swung its arm in a mighty swing John ducked beneath it. As the elite tried to recover its stance John threw his hand upward with the grenade while priming it and lodged it in between the elite's mandibles.

As the creature began gagging and trying to pull the grenade free John pulled his fist back preparing to hit the elite. "Eat this," he said quietly as he threw his fist forward with all his strength. His fist made contact with the primed grenade as he lodged the grenade farther down the elite's throat. John then threw his leg forward and kicked the elite away just before he jumped in the opposite direction. Almost immediately after he did this the grenade went off in a loud explosion. Thick purple blood was splattered everywhere when grenade detonated. The blood covered the upper part of John's back and the lower part of his legs as the elite was blown to pieces. John's shields had dropped to a sliver from the explosion. He reached up and grabbed his blood covered assault rifle as he quickly got to his feet. He turned and opened fire on the last jackal. Half of his bullets bounced off the jackal's shield until one caught the jackal in its exposed arm causing it to raise its shield as its arm was thrown back. The rest of John's bullets struck the jackal's thin torso and peppered it until it hit the ground in a pool of its own blood.

John got back behind the pillar as he reloaded his assault rifle. '_Two mags left, better make em' count,' _ he thought. He turned the pillar and in a matter of seconds he gunned down three of the grunts. He then noticed the last elite grabbing a small blue sphere from its side. The alien pressed one of its scaly four fingers on a red spot on the blue metallic object. The sphere lit up in a ghastly electric blue as the elite threw it towards John. John ran forward and dove behind a low wall twenty feet from the pillar he was just at. As John landed the plasma grenade glowed brighter and with a low wine it detonated in a large blue blaze which melted the pillar. John rose up fast and unloaded the remainder of his thirty-two bullet magazine into two more grunts. They dropped with low cries as their light blue blood covered the ground at their feet.

John took cover dodging a wave of plasma bolts and reloaded once more '_last mag,' _ he thought. He leveled his rifle onto one grunt and squeezed the trigger briefly with the flurry of bullets pelting the small alien.

Everything was in slow motion to John at this point as his adrenaline was pumping as fast as possible. Even the last few grunts and the elite were too slow. He quickly dropped the last two grunts and leapt from cover as he unloaded at the elite. The bullets hit the elite's shields as they flickered to life. John's assault rifle fell short however as the last bullet left the chamber with a clack and the elite's shields were still shimmering. John threw his weapon at the elite who caught it with its free hand. The captain then took this opportunity to charge at the large alien and tackled it into the wall of the structure. John pulled his fist back and hit the elite with three hammering blows causing the creature to drop both its weapon and his. The elite pulled itself together and cupped its hands together above John's head. It brought its arms down on John just as the Spartan was preparing to strike again. The blow sent John's head

downward as the elite pulled its knee up and struck the front of John's helmet, cracking his golden visor. The hit sent John backward. As the Captain staggered back he realized his shields were depleted from the hits he had sustained.

Just as he turned to face the elite the creature raised its plasma pistol that was previously attached to its right thigh. The elite squeezed the firing mechanism and the pistol let loose a bolt of green plasma that struck the left side of John's helmet. John's head jolted back as he quickly pulled off his helmet before the plasma could melt through his helmet and to his head. John had a large trickle of blood flowing from his left temple above his left eye that was blackened and with his eye struggling to stay open. John began running towards the elite as he unsheathed his knife. The elite fired three more bolts all of which struck John. One bolt had struck John's left shoulder melting most of the armor on it; the second bolt had struck John directly in the center of his chest and melted through straight to his body suit. The third bolt hit John in his lower left abdomen and melted through to his body suit as well. The plasma sizzled against his armor and John gritted his teeth tightly as he felt the burns settling on his skin. He ignored the pain and did not slow down as he rammed the seven inch steel blade into the surprised elite's chest. John pulled his knife upward and carved a large diagonal gash in the alien. He wrenched his knife free of the creature as it stumbled backward and fell to the ground unmoving. He then sheathed his knife as the elite's dark purple blood spread in a pool around it. John policed its remaining two plasma grenades from its waist.

The wounded Spartan grabbed his helmet which had cooled off completely and slipped it back on his head. The helmet had a large melted hole in the upper left part of it where half of its visor had been melted. John couldn't even bring his HUD up anymore. He then walked into the round structure of the anti-air cannon and saw the shielded core at the center. The core was a bright white ball of energy with a blue haze around it. John ran up and punched the shield with all his strength causing it to give way and disappear with a high pitched fading pop. He then primed one of the plasma grenades and tossed it at the core. John began running out of the structure when the grenade vanished into the light and detonated, destroying the core. With the core destroyed the structure's lights glowed red before several blue flaming explosions began erupting along its walls. The explosions continued along the cannon before the entire emplacement went up in a giant blue ball of fire.

The explosion sent John flying end over end before he hit a wall and slid to the ground. With a tired groan he began to stand. John pressed a button on his helmet praying that it still worked. "Hawkins, AA's down, send the birds and evac our forces now!" he called into his helmet.

A moment passed _"aye captain. Confirming the anti-air cannon's destruction and deploying drop ships." John sighed with relief as he sat against the wall to catch his breath for a moment. The blissful moment of peace was cut short as John heard the sound of something hitting metal. He turned his head to his left to notice a door being broken open by three flood infected humans with a loud crash. They turned their bulbous bodies towards John. "Awâ€œ|fuck," John whispered to himself. He quickly scrambled to his feet and pulled out his knife. He got into a combat stance, preparing for the creature's

attacks but noticed that they were holding assault rifles in their single normal hands and were aimed at John. "Whoa!" John yelled as he dove to his right behind a low wall barely dodging the storm of bullets. The assault rifles continued their thundering assault before clacking, something John didn't miss. As he heard footsteps and the flood forms drop their rifles he looked over the cover to find much to his horror that the creatures had disappeared.

Just as he left the cover of the low wall he looked up to spot one of the flood on top of the structure the anti-air cannon was a part of. The infected human jumped off of the structure and tackled John to the ground. The two began sliding across the ground with the sound of metal scraping against metal ringing through the streets. John used his momentum to his advantage as he positioned his legs between himself and the creature. He pushed them upward sending the flood form over him as it impacted a wall with incredible force. The brownish green creature fell to the ground and didn't move as one of its arms was broken off and sickish green liquid flowed from the corpse.

John then heard the stomping and gurgling noises of another one and turned to see one of the remaining charging him. He quickly readied his knife and began running towards the infected human. He put all his strength into his legs as he jumped and flipped over the combat form and landed on his feet behind it. He turned around and kicked the creature in the back sending it flying into another wall. John didn't let up his assault as he ran up and stabbed the bulbous mutated human brutally with his knife multiple times. After it ceased to move John pulled his blade free of its corpse.

He heard a screech and turned to see his last opponent of the group running for him. The creature was three feet away from John when it was met with a hailstorm of bullets. As the flood form was torn to shreds by the gunfire John turned his head to the right to see Alice, Amy and the rest of his team in the back of a pelican. "Miss us?!" she yelled out over the sound of the pelican's engines.

John ran towards the pelican as fast as he could "a little!" he said.

John examined his knife just before he got to the drop ship. The knife was covered in green fluid from the flood form's body. He decided to keep a tight grip on it rather than throw it away. '_Maybe the scientists can examine this,' _he thought. John strapped in a seat with Alice sitting down next to him.

She saw his wounds and spoke "what happened to you?"

He turned to face Alice "well I-" he was suddenly cut off by Amy.

"Captain" Amy said with worry in her voice "there's more of those things' heading for us." John and Alice turned their heads to the opened hatch as the ship began rising. Dozens of flood forms were pouring out of the doorway the previous three came out of and were heading for the pelican. Just as the pelican began to take off one of the flood forms had jumped and made it aboard the craft. It looked like an infected elite. The creature was strong as it had charged and pinned Amy to the wall of the pelican. Amy retaliated and caught the creature in a strong grip to prevent it from moving if it tried to

pull its 'arms' free of her grasp. Another Spartan Isaac Parker ran towards the flood and with one mighty kick sent the creature flying out the back of the pelican.

"Thanks Parker, I owe you one," Amy said as she strapped into her harness along with Parker and the rest of their team. The drop ship's hatch closed as it flew past phantoms and covenant fighters. It landed in a hanger on the Conviction and skidded to a stop as more came in behind it.

John stepped out and pressed a button on his helmet "Hawkins, have all surface squads quarantined and scanned for the infection. Let me know when everyone's made it back."

Hawkins spoke up with a neutral tone _"sir we've lost a third of our ground forces to the infection and the covenant. All of our remaining forces are back aboard the ship with no signs of infection. We had to leave a lot of people down there captain._"

John looked down "then let's not make their sacrifice be in vein. Miles blow that station to hell."

Miles soon replied almost immediately _"aye aye sir, activating the Mass Driver now." _ The ship shook as the Mass Driver rose from the top of the ship. It was a massive cannon with coils lining the elongated barrel. Within moments it turned and faced the city.

"Captain if that city is destroyed then this planet is going to collapse in on its core. The city is what keeps this planet's gravity well stabilized," Saline told John.

He turned to a nearby terminal that Alice had plugged Saline's chip into and spoke, "plot a course back out the way we came and get us out of here as soon as that city blows."

Saline's holographic image appeared "aye sir." The ship shook as it turned back towards the tunnel it entered from. The cannon on top of the ship lit up an electric blue as it built up its charge. As it fired it shook the ship violently. John had to brace himself on a support beam to keep from falling over. The round that the Mass Driver fired was a super-heated tungsten slug and was propelled by five linear arranged magnetic coils in a straight beam. As the blazing white hot slug soared towards the city the Conviction's engines roared to life as it flew towards the tunnel at top speed. When the slug impacted the city it ripped through it like it was paper and hit the core. The city began to stretch and was being slowly pulled into the core. It began melting as it was absorbed. The core then shrunk in size and began expanding rapidly.

John turned to Saline "plot a slip space course and get us out of here now!"

Saline looked worried "but captain we haven't even cleared the planet."

John held tighter to pillar "we won't be able to clear it, now make the jump. We have a straight shot through this tunnel!"

Saline looked as if she was thinking "aye sir, course plotted.

Spinning up FTL drive." The ship began shaking once more as a slip space portal appeared before it. When the ship entered the portal and the portal closed it caused a massive gravity explosion inside the tunnel that ripped it to pieces. The ship had barely cleared the planet that had gone super nova and was in slip space. John sat down by the terminal to finally catch his breath.

"Finally a break," he said to himself. Alice soon walked over to John and sat down next to him.

"Well at least that's over, we should get your wounds looked at," she said.

John took his helmet off and looked back at her "I'll get them looked at in a few but it's a shame we didn't find out what the covenant was after down there."

As If on cue Saline began to speak "actually captain i intercepted and decrypted some rather interesting communications from the covenant's battle net. Head to the ops room when you're ready to be briefed."

John leaned his head back "all right but keep alert, some of the covenant's forces must have made it away as well."

Alice took her helmet off and smiled "Wouldn't want them sneaking up on us right John?"

The captain chuckled lightly "as if I would let them.

Alice then turned to face John "now about those drinks..."

End
file.